Missing Pieces
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Missing Pieces

by sleepy_catz

Summary

It's been almost a year since the Boiling Isles were saved and Emperor Belos was taken care of, but there's an aftermath to these sorts of things and Hunter is no exception. He's struggling immensely and is struggling to realize he doesn't have to do everything on his own, so maybe when former Coven Head turned parental figure Darius Deamonne is invited to help Eda and Raine in aiding the teenager will Hunter start to see the light.

Notes

Hi and welcome to my new fic!! I've been writing this since before the season 2 finale so if some things don't align with the events of that episode, that's why lmao. Anyway, this fic starts off quite angsty but I promise it gets better and there is fluff. It's more wovengold focused towards the beginning, but it will start becoming more centered on Hunter and his friends as the story progresses. There is Huntlow because I find them very cute and had to add them in, but the story overall is about Hunter healing. I really hope you guys like this because I've been going insane over these characters to a Completely Normal degree. So

please, enjoy. :)

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter One

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. Little footsteps sounded in rapid succession. They were frantic and clumsy, as if the one causing them were in a panic. The hallways here were long and empty most of the time, quiet. Things echoed in here, most sound was quite loud in the often-silent corridors. The Emperor had a taste for fine things, and intricate wallpaper and pale marble floor paired with golden accents was enchanting to say the least, but something about this place was depressing. Maybe it was the people within these walls that made them so sad to be within. No one was happy here, not a single soul, or so it appeared to him. He wasn't happy, he hadn't been for years, not since his mentor had left this realm. He'd been filled with an empty feeling since, his heart feeling hollow and dulled with pain, sadness, and a strange sort of contempt. He almost felt awful for where that contempt stemmed from.

A small form hit him in the back, a pained *"oof!"* followed by the little person hitting the hard floor sounding behind him. The frantic footsteps had stopped, no more pitter-pattering, the only sound to fill these halls now was the anxiety riddled heavy breathing hitching with barely contained sobs below him. He turned to face the person who had run into him, and he frowned - grimaced was more like it.

"Ah, little prince, why in such a hurry?" He said it dully, no hint of joy in his voice at all. No concern, no cheer, nothing but thinly concealed irritation.

The boy on the ground was wrapped in a white cloak that covered him like drapery. He looked much too small in it, like he shouldn't be wearing it. And he really shouldn't be. None of it belonged to him. The golden mask covering his face was a painful reminder of the previous man who held his position. Man. Not a boy. A brave man. A kind and caring and patient man. Not this weak, sensitive, pathetic little child.

He was sniveling, trying to hide the fact that he was crying under that mask. His little hands were trembling, and he tenderly cradled one to his chest, opposite hand attempting to hide it, it appeared. The older man raised an eyebrow at this, curious, "Has something happened? Did you jam your fingers in a door or something?"

It was sarcastic and irritating, something the boy very quickly noticed. He sniffled and shook his head vehemently, "I-I was— I was—"

His small voice was having trouble speaking, his words strained, and the Coven Head could tell how closed up his throat had become. He was teetering on the edge of completely falling apart and he hated to admit that he felt a twinge of concern make his stomach drop. He took a step closer to the child, only for the boy to kick his boot heels into the floor and scoot himself back. The older man stopped, eyebrows lowering over his eyes, "What happened?"

The child continued to pull in uneven and ragged breaths, his quaking shoulders barely even noticeable beneath the heavy cloak. A few sounds escaped his throat, as if he were trying to find his voice, but then he stopped and took a shaking inhale. His fingers curled tighter around his hand, and when he released the breath again, he mustered up what motivation he had left and tried to clarify, "I-I was practicing with my staff in the training room, b-but Captain Bruegese came in with his group and-and he took my staff, and he grabbed me and he-he—"

He started hyperventilating, pulling his arms closer to his chest, a sob forcing its way up his throat and coming out strangled and pathetic. The man frowned, unsure of how to approach this. He never prided himself in being good with children, especially not when the child is… *him.* He

should've turned away really, left him here to cry on the floor alone. It would've been easier that way, his life would've gone on peacefully. But, despite everything he tried to force upon himself, all of the pain and anger he held in his heart for misgivings and misfortune that had been stricken upon him, he was still a good-natured person at his core.

As much as his mind was screaming at him to stay away, to not get close to someone else ever again, his feet still moved forward. He stepped closer to the boy on the verge of a panic attack, kneeling down in front of him and sighing as he thought up something to say. He really was bad at stuff like this, "What happened, little one?"

The boy was making some awfully pathetic sounds, trembling under his cloak that dragged on the floor behind him when he walked. He was a bit young for this, he thought. He couldn't have been even twelve yet, but here he was being the Golden Guard already. Was Emperor Belos really so impatient? Or did all the guards start so young? His mentor was already a fully grown adult when they met, but he never knew much about his duties, he didn't like to talk about them. Instead, he showed him how to fight and how to defend himself, how to manage his duties for the future when he became a Coven Head, and even more minor things like sewing and how to carve his own palisman. The last one was in secret, no one had been allowed to know, and he never knew why until he joined the Emperor's Coven for good. He had always wondered before why his mentor didn't have his palisman with him on duty. He was just trying to hide them, much like he had to hide his now.

"My-my hand…" The boy finally answered him, shoulders hitching with a repressed sob.

He sighed again looking at him, chartreuse eyes shifting to look at the hand he still held to his chest protectively. It was as if he were afraid to show it to him, but that didn't surprise him. The kid was often upset when he ran into him, at least recently. He'd only been made the Golden Guard a couple of months ago, and since then his training had been intense. He was a clumsy child, and while attentive he seemed to have his head in the clouds some days. He liked to ramble on about things he read about in his books, but he'd been talking about those things less and less lately. He'd never been treated fairly, but it had only gotten worse since his duties began. The captains in the Emperor's Coven were perhaps pissed off that someone as young as this boy was working so close with the Emperor, maybe they were jealous, and some were just cruel.

"Let me see," He wiggled his fingers as a gesture for the child to let him see his injured hand, but he didn't seem too keen on that. He was usually quite patient, but when dealing with this boy he'd rather get their interactions out of the way as soon as possible. So, he reached forward and took the boy's wrist in his hand, which made him suck in a sharp inhale and make a fearful sound. He was gentle though; he wasn't going to hurt him. He may have confusing and conflicting feelings about him, but he would never lay his hand on a child.

He flipped his hand over to inspect it, and he frowned deeper at the sight. There was a deep cut across his palm, blood coating the length of it and staining his pale skin. It wasn't deep enough to leave a noticeable scar, but it was still bloody enough to need immediate attention.

"Captain Bruegese did this to you?" He asked, his tone gentle but there was a tightness to it that displayed a repressed anger.

The boy sniffled again and nodded, humming a fearful, "Mhm."

Again, he sighed, "It needs to be cleaned up and disinfected, definitely bandaged. There's a small medicinal office just around the corner, I can take you there and help you with this."

The child was trying his hardest to stop himself from crying, but he wasn't having an easy time

with halting the small whimpers and sad sounds he was making, “I-I’m sorry.”

For some reason, that made his irritation falter. He really didn’t want to give this boy too much attention, but he couldn’t stand seeing others hurt like this, much less a harmless child such as this. A soft smile pulled at the corners of his lips, and he let his shoulders drop a bit, relaxing, “It’s alright, little prince. There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

His chest heaved with heavy breaths, and it only got worse when he looked down at himself and saw the blood staining the front of his cloak, “Oh no! Uncle Belos is gunna be so upset! I-I have to fix it! I can— I can—”

“Calm down, it’s alright. There’s no use in crying over spilled milk,” He tried to calm him, squeezing his wrist a little, the pressure pulling the kid’s attention back to him, “I have a potion that gets stains like that out of clothes, even something as often pristine as your cloak. It’ll be gone in seconds and your uncle will never have to know.”

Well, that certainly seemed to do the trick in calming him down, at least just a little. He took a few deep breaths, though they still stuttered, and he wheezed, “I-I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be so weak, I should—”

“You’re a child, being weak is what you’re supposed to be,” He informed him, even if he knew the boy would disagree, “You’re learning and growing, don’t be in such a rush to grow up.”

He shook his head, “B-But—”

“It’s not very sanitary to be sputtering with this on, now is it?” He stopped the boy before he could argue, raising his opposite hand and grabbing the edge of his mask, lifting it off of his face and letting it rest atop his mess of blonde hair.

He was similar in appearance to the previous Golden Guard. Same blonde hair, same eyes, same face shape. That’s why it’s so hard to look at him, to get close to him. Not because he spited the boy, but because he was afraid of liking him. He couldn’t get too close, not again. It was too painful. Luckily, there were differences in their appearance. His nose was different, he had an unruly cowlick that stuck straight up at the front of his head, and he had a gap in between his front teeth. So, they weren’t exactly the same, this boy was notably different. An individual.

He smiled a little bigger, “There. Not so stuffy now, is it?”

He sniffled and pouted, bottom lip stuck up dramatically making him look very much his age. Titan, he was so young, “Thank you, Darius.”

“Of course, child,” He got to his feet then, helping the little boy to his own feet that were covered in boots that looked janky on his small frame, “Now come on. I do still have duties to attend to today.”

“Yes sir,” He nodded, gaze cast downwards as he lifted an arm to wipe at his snot and tear covered face.

He grimaced at the title, “Go back to calling me Darius, sir is too formal for you, little prince.”

The boy lifted his head to look at him again, still pouting and maroon eyes bloodshot, “Will you call me by my name instead of ‘little prince?’”

He wasn’t so sure about that; he quite liked the nickname for the brat. He sighed though and kept his smile, placing a hand on the middle of the kid’s back and nudging him forward down the

hallway, “I guess, only for today, Hunter.”

He led him to the medicinal office around the corner as promised and helped mend his injured hand, taking his cloak in the end and promising to fix it up for him. As much as he told himself he couldn’t get attached it appeared by that moment it was already too late. He’d made his bed, now it was time for him to lay in it.

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He admits, he grew fond of the boy, but it took some time. Distancing himself from him wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t necessarily hard to do either. As he grew into his teenage years, Hunter became smug and maybe a bit too confident in his role as the Golden Guard. He acted with blind authority, never quite thinking through his actions before committing to them. He’d ended up hurting himself over and over unintentionally, and in turn he’d hurt others. Even still, he was annoyingly arrogant about the whole thing. I command you to do this, I have the authority to do that, it was constant with this kid. He let his pride go to his head, and even worse he shifted this nauseating arrogance onto Belos. He defended just about everything that man did, hung off of his every word, and yet every time Darius saw him leave a meeting with the Emperor the boy looked sad and worse for wear.

He disappeared for a while at one point when he was about thirteen. He had been gone for three days. It was odd and Darius had felt himself become worried. Had Belos tired of him already? Had Hunter discovered the truth? But low and behold, Hunter returned and with a scar spanning his right jaw and cheek. Darius hadn’t asked directly about it, though Raine had. Hunter had said it was a training accident and then rushed off muttering about a mission. They both knew better than that, they knew how Belos treated that boy, but they said nothing. It was something Darius regretted to this day.

Despite it all, Hunter remained a smug know-it-all who enjoyed rambling about the things he read about. He was told to shut up most of the time, and Darius also regretted that he had told him to leave him alone on more than several occasions. Darius regretted a lot of things when it came to that boy, and as much as he wanted to blame it on needing to keep his cover he knew that wasn’t true. He didn’t want to be close to him, he reminded him too much of his mentor. It was painful to look at him for a while, but personality wise Hunter and the previous Golden Guard were very different. While one was patient, one was reckless. While one was level-headed, one was almost embarrassingly temperamental. Though they did share one thing: their kindhearted nature. Surprisingly enough, Darius found that to be a breath of fresh air.

He was kind, smart, funny, and sweet. Despite everything Darius did to keep the boy at arm's length, he just couldn’t bring himself to dislike him. *Because* he was kind. *Because* he was sweet. *Because he was Hunter.* Smug and hot-headed and excitable Hunter. And that day at Hexide that he saw the kid smile and have fun and be himself was the day Darius decided he was going to protect him from anything ever hurting him again. And the first time he failed that was perhaps a hurt that Hunter needed to feel.

The mindscape. Darius had panicked when he saw Hunter and that human girl Edalyn was looking after disappear in a flash of golden light, being transported into the darkest mind in the Boiling Isles: Emperor Belos’. Raine was the one that ended up getting them out of there, sneakily aiding their ex-girlfriend in crafting a potion that helped them escape. They had been nearby when the kids were pulled out of the mindscape and they saw when Hunter came storming out, breathing hard with tears streaming down his face.

So, he knew. He knew everything. He knew how Belos truly felt about him. He knew that Belos

felt nothing about throwing him away like he was garbage. He knew that he wasn't a witch, that he was a Grimwalker, a clone of a man he'd never know. He must have been so confused, so lost and he must have felt so alone. They hadn't been able to find him that night, they hadn't been able to find him for quite some time.

Though, he did show up eventually. He'd been hiding out at Hexide, and those friends he made just weeks before had been there to help him. After that, things got… dangerous. The Day of Unity was upon them, and Hunter was under threat. Things were tricky for a while, but Darius promised to protect him and all of his friends, the other adults agreed. This wasn't something children should be going through, and they'd do everything in their power to keep all of them safe. It was hard considering Hunter was a wanted man and apparently Eda's demon son was the last of the Titan's so that certainly was… news. In the end though, despite people getting hurt and gaining even more emotional trauma, everyone was okay in the end. A collective sigh of relief was taken in the Boiling Isles when Belos was exposed for who he truly was and dethroned. Dead. Everyone knew what kind of monster he was now; they knew of the lies he told and the people he hurt, no one would be hurt by him again.

Slowly, things shifted into a sense of normalcy. Luz the Human was able to fix the door permanently and go back to the Human Realm, but she was able to go back and forth between her world and this one. She refused to never be able to see her friends again, and with her mother's permission she remained enrolled at Hexide all while being homeschooled in subjects from her world. She was constantly studying, something she complained about constantly, but she was happy nonetheless and spent her free time hanging out with her friends. They all went back to school, the world became more open and accepting to covenless witches and witches who liked to practice multi-magic, and overall the Boiling Isles was flourishing much like it was hundreds of years ago before Philip Wittebane ever pushed his evil ideology onto the people.

The question raised after all was said and done though was: what to do with Hunter. He needed a place to stay, someone to take care of him. He was seventeen and lost, and the sadness in his eyes was somehow even more present than before. He was happy Belos was gone, he was relieved to know he couldn't hurt him anymore, but he was scared all the same. Trauma doesn't disappear overnight or ever for that matter, and he had a long road ahead of him in learning how to deal with it, but he couldn't do it alone. He needed a support system, and he did have that in his friends, and he had it in Eda who it turns out he's sort of related to. At first, everyone thought it best that he stays with her, but he sort of had several different parental figures that had risen up since the beginning of this whole thing and now Eda, Raine, and Darius were all sort of… looking after him. He was still getting used to the whole *'adults are supposed to protect their kids'* thing.

He flinched when people so much as got irritated, even though most often that irritation wasn't even directed at him. Luz getting mad at a video game. King yelling at his stuffed animal army. Hooty bursting through the door with no warning whatsoever and screaming. Well, that last one would spook anyone, but Hunter had been sent into a panic attack once or twice over it. It wasn't just other people being irritated that startled him, he was spooked over loud noises and sudden movements. Certain smells could even send him spiraling. He was getting better bit by bit, but it was an incredibly slow process. He'd never completely heal of course, Belos had put him through so much and he'd always carry that with him, but he was growing, and he would be happy someday. For now, everyone around him was patient.

Though perhaps the worst thing about all of this was how Hunter was always trying to *'prove himself.'* He felt he wasn't worthy of anyone's time, and so he woke up way too early and worked himself into exhaustion even when he was told he didn't have to do any of the chores he forced himself to do. He'd cleaned up the Owl House top to bottom, did laundry, scrubbed floors. When he ran out of household chores to do he made up jobs that didn't even need to be done. He

reorganized Eda's entire bookshelf, alphabetizing her collection. He was in a manic state half the time and he refused to sleep, and that's finally when Darius stepped in to try and assist Eda and Raine (who now lived together) in taking care of the kid. Granted, he didn't volunteer, Raine actually called him and filled him in on the situation and that's how he ended up on the Owl House doorstep.

"Darius, glad you could make it," Raine was the one who answered the door, a sheepish smile on their face and a tired look in their eyes.

Darius was tired too. He'd been doing a lot to help the new government of the Boiling Isles take shape and function like a proper government. He retook his position as a Coven Head, as did Eberwolf. Raine had taken up theirs as well, but said it was only temporary as they would like to go back to a more relaxed lifestyle after all was said and done. The other Covenheads, such as Adrien and Terra, were dealt with appropriately.

"So, the little prince is acting up, I've heard?" He said it with a smug inflection to his tone, but his exhaustion shone through and something about what he said came out as bland and cold as well.

"Oh, no. He's not acting out, he's perfectly fine. Well…" They backtracked at the end there, the diffident and crooked smile still pulling their lips tight, teeth showing, "He's… Perfect in the way that he's Hunter, but he's been rather… How do I put this? Frantic?"

He remembers how Hunter was when he first told them all about what he'd seen in Belos' mind. He looked worse than usual, circles under his eyes almost purple and pupils dilated. His speech was fast, and he trembled with every word spoken. His state of mind hadn't been good for several weeks, and as Raine had informed him over the phone, he still was barely sleeping.

"Well invite me in so I can see the little troublemaker," Darius motioned with a hand towards the inside of the house, impatient.

"Oh right, of course. Come in," Raine stepped back and out of the way, holding onto the door as if it were the only thing keeping them on their feet.

Darius stepped into the home, looking around in a bored manner. His carelessness fell away slightly though when he saw how spotless it was in here. Eda was known for keeping her house sort of cluttered, and while Raine wasn't as untidy as their girlfriend they weren't exactly keen on keeping everything spotless either. This place was so clean Darius wouldn't have been surprised if it sparkled. Very unlike these two.

"So, he's still working himself to the bone?" He questioned as if he didn't already know the answer, running a finger along the hutch where they kept their keys, not a single speck of dust coming up, his finger remaining clean.

Raine closed the door with a gentle click; they'd all been keeping rather quiet since Hunter moved in, the boy was startled by everything. They approached Darius, wringing their hands nervously; their anxiety had been heightened with lack of sleep, "He's constantly doing something. We've tried telling him to relax and read a book or go be with his friends, but he just doesn't listen to that. He keeps telling us he has to *'earn his keep.'"*

Darius grimaced at that. Hunter had known nothing but work his entire life, so it was no surprise that he was still operating under that mentality. When he was still the Golden Guard he was constantly trying to prove he was worthy, showing off how agile and powerful he was with that staff of his and constantly bragging about the Emperor's Coven and its efforts to help witches all across the Boiling Isles. He'd been molded to be that way, his constant search for validation and

acceptance was all because of how that man treated him and groomed him into being. Darius felt anger boil in the pit of his stomach just thinking about the former leader of the Isles, but he ground his teeth and clenched his fists to quell that feeling. He needed to be calm when he spoke to Hunter.

“Has he left the house at all?” Darius asked the other Coven Head curiously, concern seeping into his tone that he tried to hide for some reason.

Raine shook their head, finally frowning, “No… Luz was here for the weekend, and she did get him to watch a movie with her and they practiced drawing glyphs, but he closed up again as soon as she left.”

Darius hummed in thought, and then he asked a question he already knew the answer to, “And he won’t go see his friends? The ones from Hexide?”

Again, Raine shook their head, “No. We’ve mentioned it a couple of times, but he never seems enthusiastic about it, so we don’t push him.”

“And so you’ve called me over to help nudge him along? You’re too soft, Whispers,” Darius teased with a complacent little smirk.

Raine rolled their eyes, crossing their arms and huffing in exaggerated irritation, “We don’t want you to just have a talk with him, Titan knows we’ve been doing enough of that ourselves.”

Darius raised an eyebrow then, confused, “Then what did you call me over here to do?”

Again, Raine let their arms fall to their sides, frowning with a nervous air about them, “Well, you see, we can’t really force him out of the house if he’s not ready for it, but we think if he had someone around that he knew well…”

Darius knew where this was going. He held up a hand, shaking his head and quickly moving on to deny, “No. Don’t even continue, just—”

“Darius, it’s just for a few days, and he trusts you!” Raine pleaded with him, clasping their hands together in front of their chest as they stepped closer. They had that look in their eyes, that imploring desperation. They really were at their last wit.

But Darius wasn’t convinced, “Does he? Last time I checked, the brat doesn’t trust anyone.”

Raine narrowed their eyes just a smidgen at his odd stubbornness, “Why are you talking like that? You’re acting as if you want nothing to do with him, but if I remember correctly, you were pulling your hair out trying to find him after what happened in the mindscape.”

Darius’ stubborn expression faltered momentarily at their accusation, “I was not!”

That was a lame denial, one a small child would make if someone accused them of hitting another child. Raine was not amused, “You very much were, so stop pretending you still want to distance yourself from him and help us out,” Their tone softened then, as did their expression, “Please, Darius. We need your help.”

Raine was wrong. Not about him being anxious and worried when Hunter disappeared, he very much was, he just wouldn’t admit it out loud. What they were wrong about however was how Darius wouldn’t want to distance himself from the kid. He very much did. No, he wasn’t still clinging onto the echo of his mentor, he had coped with that and separated the previous Golden Guard and Hunter completely. They were different. What he didn’t want to do however was get attached. He had lost so much already, he had no one left. His mentor was gone, his family,

everyone. Even though he realistically knew the danger was gone and Hunter was safe now, he still refused to get attached to anyone. He was afraid to, and that was something else he wouldn't admit out loud.

Raine was looking at him with a sad sort of pleading. They really wanted his help, and Darius knew he should. He'd been looking after Hunter from afar since he was a clumsy little kid, and Raine looked dead tired. As much as he wanted to be selfish, he did really care about Hunter and he didn't want him to go through more pain than he already had. Maybe he could help. He could at least try, though he never prided himself in being good with kids. But Hunter wasn't a regular kid, was he?

Darius sighed, feigning irritation so his true soft interior didn't get revealed so swiftly. He closed his eyes briefly and motioned around the room a bit frantically, "Where is the little one? Take me to him."

Raine exhaled in relief, tense muscles relaxing and a happy little smirk tugged up the corners of their lips, "He's in the kitchen. Follow me."

Raine turned and started towards the kitchen, a room that was directly adjacent to the living room. Darius followed after them, looking around the eerily spotless home. Hunter didn't miss a thing when cleaning up here, every surface was spotless, and every tabletop and shelf was organized neatly. The smell of chemical cleaning supplies was rampant in the air, it was almost nauseating and it burned his nostrils. He coughed a bit to clear his throat and when the door to the kitchen was pushed open, he was relieved of the smell. It wasn't as bad here, probably because the smell of a recently cooked meal was migrating into the air in this room.

Eda was sitting at the table, turned awkwardly in her chair and a solemn and concerned expression on her face. She had her arm stretched across the table towards the occupant sitting semi-across from her, though she wasn't quite touching him. Hunter was seated somewhat next to her, hands folded into his lap awkwardly and head bowed slightly; his back was facing the door.

Eda looked up when Raine and Darius entered the room, noticeably relaxing at the sight of them, "I'm glad you could make it."

Hunter's back straightened when Eda turned her attention to the two behind him, and he turned in his seat to look at them as well. Darius had to repress a cringe when he saw his face. The circles under his eyes looked darker, his maroon eyes were wide and a bit crazed, manic even from lack of sleep. He was pale and trembling, and he looked like he'd lost weight, his t-shirt hanging off of his frail shoulders loosely.

"Darius? What are you doing here?" His voice was raspy and weak, it was like he'd been yelling or crying; he'd probably been doing both.

Darius took a breath and took a step further into the room, folding his hands in front of him, fingers interlocking, "Raine gave me a call, told me to come by to see you."

Hunter didn't like the sound of that based on the mangled fearful expression that passed over his face. He sunk in his seat a little bit, shoulders hunching up and hands wringing tightly in his lap, "Am I in trouble?"

Raine shook their head, quickly approaching the teenager to clear that up immediately, "Oh no, Hunter, you're not in trouble, don't worry. I've just called Darius here because…" They looked at Darius whose expression remained the same, and then they looked to Eda who smiled sweetly before directing their attention back to the tired boy, "We're worried about you."

“Oh,” He said, eyes drifting towards his feet that were covered in blue socks with whales on them, a gift from Luz. He looked back up at the three adults in just a second, a deep frown settled on his face and that fearful glint was still in his eyes, “I-I don’t understand. Why are you worried? Did something happen?”

His speech got a little more frenzied the further he spoke, and he sat up in his chair more as panic started to seize control. Raine held up a hand, slowly lifting it so as not to startle the boy, “No, no, nothing happened. Eda, did you not tell him?”

She smiled sheepishly and lifted her hands to shrug, “He wasn’t eating so the conversation got sidetracked.”

Understandable enough. Raine focused on Hunter again, “Hunter, I called Darius here because of…” They had to choose their words carefully, Hunter often read things with negative connotations, “Well, we’re just concerned about how you’ve been acting.”

He frowned somehow deeper than before, and with every word one of them spoke he seemed to grow more fearful, “I’m sorry, did I do something wrong? I can do better.”

Raine shook their head and stepped around to be in front of Hunter, kneeling down to be more on level with him and reaching out a careful hand and placing it gently on the boy’s knee, “No, you’ve done nothing wrong. Just listen to what we have to say, okay? You’re not in trouble.”

That seemed to ease his worries a little bit, but he was still rather tense, his breath somewhat shallow with a tapered anxiety, “O-Okay.”

Raine smiled tightly and then looked over their shoulder at Eda, who smiled tiredly in return. She scooted forward in her seat a little and leaned over, elbows on her knees and fingers interlocking in front of them. She caught Hunter’s eyes, her own gaze tender to show she wasn’t upset, “Do you like living here, Hunter?”

His eyes widened at the question, and he nodded frantically, “Yeah! I love staying here! I’m very grateful you’ve allowed me to stay in your home, I’m trying everything I can to repay you for your kindness.”

Eda and Raine both looked to Darius at this, and he frowned. He knew this would happen; they all did. It’s how Hunter grew up. He was raised by an abusive and manipulative man, someone who was pure evil. He’d been told his entire life that all he was worth was how he performed on missions, how well he listened, how well he obeyed. Without that strict structure and constant push to prove he was worthy of keeping around he didn’t know how to function. He knew not everyone was like Belos, but he couldn’t seem to get it through his head that he didn’t need to earn their love, he just got it because he was already worth it just by being Hunter.

“Kid, you don’t need to repay us,” Eda told him in a soft tone of voice, “All you need to do is relax and just be a kid, nothing more.”

His face twisted up in confusion, nose wrinkling and lips pursing tightly as he tried to get what she said to him through his head. It didn’t work out so well, “But… You’ve both done so much for me, I need to do something to show you how much I appreciate it.”

“Hunter, you cleaned the entire house. It’s never been this spotless before. Hell, you even cleaned Hooty’s feathers, that’s a task I’d ask of no one,” She tried to joke but to no avail, Hunter only shook his head as the confusion pressed on.

“I don’t understand,” He said, and before he could go on, Raine was throwing in their two cents.

“You’ve been doing chores for three weeks straight, isn’t there anything else you want to do? You like to read, don’t you? You should go and do that. And what about your friends? Don’t you ever want to go and see them?” They were hoping the mention of his favorite hobbies and his friends would make him snap out of it, but not even that was working.

“I can’t. I-I—” He couldn’t even begin to spiral though; Darius has had enough of this.

“Oh, for Titan’s sake,” He huffed in exasperation, throwing his arms to his sides and stepping forward. Everyone in the room looked at him in surprise at his outburst, but he ignored them and focused in on Hunter, turning to face him and standing next to a kneeling Raine, “Stop beating around the bush, both of you. Listen little one, the reason I was called over here is because Raine told me you’ve been overworking yourself and barely resting. Now, somehow I’ve been roped into being your third guardian so here I am to help out. I’ll be staying a few days so everyone can get adequate rest and we can all work together to make sure you start taking care of yourself. Understood? Good. Now that that’s settled, I’ll be going back home to get my things.”

Everyone fell silent, taken aback by his sudden spiel. Hunter blinked. Once. Twice. Just as Darius was about to turn and leave the room, the boy spoke, “Have I really been that bad?”

Titan, this kid never read anything without assuming there was a hidden negative agenda behind it. Darius reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, a bit irritated but trying not to show too much of that emotion when speaking with the kid, “Titan— No, you’ve not been bad. These two just need some help.”

Hunter chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, thinking everything Darius had said over. It filtered through his brain differently though, they all knew that, and he came out still addled about it all, “I don’t understand…”

Raine placed their hands on Hunter’s shoulders, dropping them very carefully on him. His t-shirt was soft, just how he liked it. Micro-fiber, that’s what Luz had called it. When he’d first started living here he wore a few hand-me-downs, but the texture had been too ‘scratchy’ so he favored one shirt in particular that was incredibly lightweight and soft. It just so happened to be an extra Bad Girls Coven t-shirt Eda had in the closet upstairs, she was very happy for him to wear it. Though, it became all he would wear so they bought him some new clothes with a texture he liked. That only led him into thinking he needed to repay them for that as well. It was like a never-ending cycle.

“Hunter, some people need help, like you need help. You know this, of course,” Raine said to him, and Hunter nodded. He understood that the way he thought and acted wasn’t average behavior, he knew Belos was a bad person who was responsible for some of the ways he was. He knew he had a lot of problems to work through, he had acknowledged that. In theory, it was one thing, but when put into action it was so much harder to get better, “And sometimes it helps to have a good system of people that you can trust to help. Do you trust us?”

Hunter looked at them and Eda. They were both smiling at him, their expressions so very kind. They’d been nothing but good to him since he’s been here. They never raised their voice or a hand against him. They were there when he was breaking down, keeping distance yet speaking kind words that left him feeling warm. They were there when he had a nightmare, and when he felt too ill to eat, and when he couldn’t sleep. They were always so patient, they never complained even though he felt as if he were burdening them this whole time. And maybe that’s why he thought Darius being here was because they were tired of dealing with him and wanted someone else to take the reins.

“Are you tired of me?” He felt like he could cry, tears burning his eyes, but he absolutely refused to let them spill. It was hard though. He was so tired.

“No, we’re not tired of you,” Eda cut in softly, a hand on his knee, “In fact, having you here is incredible. We love having you here, you’re a great kid. It’s not that we’re tired of you, it’s just that we think having Darius here would be good for you.”

Raine nodded in agreement, “You’ve known him the longest and he knows a lot about you. He’s been looking out for you since you were this tall.”

They held out their hand beside them, showing off how little Hunter was since Darius has been keeping an eye on him. Hunter grimaced, “But—”

“He’s stubborn and won’t admit it, but he’s cared about you longer than he’s letting on,” Raine told him, casting a glance at Darius knowingly.

Darius shoved away the heat that wanted to rise to his face at the revelation and he tried ignoring the surprised look in Hunter’s eyes when he turned to look at him. He cleared his throat and swiped a hand downward to dismiss this, “You were a kid in constant danger, I didn’t want you to get hurt. I… failed a lot of the time, unfortunately.”

He frowned, arms loosening from where they were crossed over his midsection. Hunter had been hurt over and over again under his watch. The scar across his palm was put there because a captain became jealous of a little boy. He got a scar on his face because he was excitedly rambling to his *‘uncle’* about what he’d learned about wild magic. His nose had been broken by that horrible and cruel man, or at least that’s what Darius had assumed, but Hunter never complained. Darius had watched him be smacked around, pushed and shoved, bones broken by other Coven members and the man who had told Hunter over and over again that all of his pain were just learning experiences for him to get better. Darius had failed repeatedly to protect him. But no more.

He sighed, expression softening. He took a few steps back into the room, stopping next to Raine and looking down at the frightened child in the chair; his trembling was very much noticeable. Darius kneeled down next to Raine, but he kept his hands to himself unlike the other two trying to comfort Hunter, “I’m here to help, okay? Are you okay with that?”

Hunter was quiet for a second. He was still getting used to people asking him what he was okay with. Eda and Raine were always asking him what he was comfortable with doing, if it was okay for them to cook a certain meal for dinner, if it was okay for them to hug him. He had always been forced to do things even if he didn’t want to, so he really appreciated everyone constantly asking him what he was okay with. Looking at Darius now, the man looked soft, kind of like how he looked the first time they met after the mindscape revelations. He was patient, waiting for a response. He thinks he’s okay with this.

He swallowed thickly, fingers curling against his knees and gripping his pants legs in anxiety. He nodded, “Yes, that’s okay.”

Both Eda and Raine took a breath of relief at his answer, and Hunter was surprised to see Darius actually smile a little, “I’m glad you trust me enough to let me stay here,” He got to his feet again, keeping his hands to himself. Hunter already had Raine and Eda touching him, he didn’t need a third person crowding him, that might get overwhelming. So, Darius just took a step back and fell back into his usual bored persona, “Now, first things first. You’re going to go up to your room or on the couch or wherever is comfortable for you, and you’re going to get some sleep.”

Hunter frowned, shoulders stiffening, and he shut down a little, “But—”

“Nightmares, right?” Darius questioned, arms crossed again. Hunter’s eyes peered up at him sadly, and he pouted as he nodded, keeping silent. Darius understood, “They’re a pain, I know. I used to struggle with them when I was younger, not much older than you actually. But you can’t let them keep you from sleeping.”

“I-I know… But I keep… seeing *him,”* Hunter’s voice wavered, breaking off at the end as if he choked on the last word.

All three adults shared a sad look, understanding his situation but also knowing he couldn’t keep forcing himself to stay awake. Eda tried to offer comfort, “Somebody can stay with you while you sleep, that way if you have a nightmare one of us can wake you up.”

Hunter shook his head, turning that down quickly, “No, I already told you that you guys don’t have to do that. I don’t want to mess up your sleep more than I already have.”

“Kid, we’ll sleep better when you do,” Eda nudged him on the leg gently, chuckling a little but he didn’t seem too amused, “Okay, how about this. Just this once, somebody will stay with you. If in the end you don’t want anyone hovering over you, then we’ll back off. But if you don’t mind it, then we can all take turns until you’re ready to be on your own again. Does that sound like a good deal?”

His nails were digging into his legs a bit harshly but not enough to dent the skin under his pants. It was a compromise that Eda was offering, he decided he couldn’t deny that, so he nodded so gently they almost didn’t see it, “Okay, that sounds… doable.”

“Great,” Eda chirped, happy he’d agreed to one of their ideas for once, “King can join us if you want. He used to cuddle with Luz when she wasn’t feeling well and it always made her feel safer. It might work with you too?”

Hunter nodded again, a little clearer this time, “I think I’d like that.”

Okay, finally, they were getting somewhere. Darius looked around, an eyebrow raised. Someone was missing, “Where’s Flapjack?”

Hunter’s ear twitched at the sound of his palisman being mentioned, and he turned his head to look at Darius again and answer his question, though he looked confused and slightly panic-stricken, “She was just here. W-Where did she go? Flapjack?”

He looked around, somewhat distraught as he searched for his palisman he’s lost sight of. Raine squeezed his shoulder, pulling him back down from his spiraling thoughts, “She’s in your room sleeping, remember? You didn’t want to disturb her, so you left her alone.”

“Oh… Right, yeah… Sorry, I keep forgetting stuff for some reason…” He muttered, bowing his head so he didn’t have to look at any of them, ashamed.

“And that’s just another reason for you to get some rest,” Eda told him, nudging him again, this time on the arm as she stood up, “Come on, let’s go get Flapjack and King and take a nap. I could go for some shut-eye myself.”

He nodded again but stayed silent as he got to his feet, going to follow Eda as she went to go back into the living room to go get King who was curled up on the couch last time she saw him. Hunter moved away from the chair, Raine backing out of his way and getting to their feet as well. Hunter took a step forwards, but as soon as he did his knees buckled and the exhaustion that had settled over him caused by going days without sleep had finally caught up to him. He went careening

towards the floor, but before he ever even hit it someone caught him.

He fell against a chest, hands gripping his arms not tightly but firm enough so he wouldn't slip out of their grasp. His feet slid awkwardly against the floor as he tried to steady his stance. When he finally pulled his face away from whoever he'd fallen into, he lifted his head to see Darius peering down at him with a concerned look in his green eyes, "Are you alright?"

Hunter felt his face burn. That was all very embarrassing, "Y-Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry."

Darius frowned, almost pouting, and he shook his head, "No need to apologize, just… go and get some rest, alright?"

Hunter nodded, face burning hotter when he realized both Eda and Raine were looking at him and saw that whole thing. Darius kept his hands on his arms a moment longer, making sure he was balanced properly before he finally let him go to follow Eda. The boy stepped back and bowed his head politely, "I will. Thank you."

And then he stepped around him to go and join Eda, following her out of the kitchen and into the living room. Darius grimaced as his eyes followed them, watching them go. Raine sighed a breath of relief, slumping into the chair behind them and closing their tired eyes. Darius heard the thump of them collapsing into the chair, and it pulled his attention back around to face them. They looked absolutely exhausted, though there was some relief in their eyes when they opened them again and thanked him.

"Thank you for this, Darius. We're both very grateful you're willing to help," They smiled wearily, corners of their mouth dimpling.

Darius tried to school his expression back into its usual idle appearance, but his worry was eating away at him at the moment, "It was a good idea you called me, he's doing worse than I thought."

Raine's smile dropped quickly. They turned their head to look out the window on the other side of the table, watching the leaves rustle in the cooling wind as the summer came to a close; classes would be resuming soon, "He's trying really hard. He'll have a good sleep once like he's going to go and do now, but he usually wakes up from a nightmare and then he won't sleep or will sleep very little for days. He's terrified to close his eyes and that exhaustion is putting him more on edge than he's ever been."

They knew why. Before the Day of Unity everyone had been so focused on taking down Belos before he could hurt any more people that Hunter, or anyone for that matter, didn't have time to worry about themselves. Albeit, Hunter did have nightmares then too, and he had frequent panic attacks over whether or not Belos would be coming for him. He was terrified he'd be killed. But he had a lot of things on his plate back then, and he was worried about protecting those he cared about too. He was working to save the Boiling Isles, but now all of that was over. He was free to just be a kid, be himself. He'd never had that freedom before, and now without anything else on his mind to focus on, all his mind could concentrate on was his own issues and it was tearing him apart.

Raine was anxious over the kid, picking at their fingernails as they watched the trees outside that surrounded the Owl House. Darius took a breath and stepped over, heavy boots making quite the ruckus on the hard floor, but Raine didn't acknowledge him until he was reaching out and putting a hand on their shoulder. They looked up at him with wide and curious eyes, waiting for him to speak. Darius offered a reassuring little smirk, "Don't worry yourself to death over this. He'll be okay. We're all here for him and we'll make sure of it."

Raine looked at him, searching his face to find any hint of uncertainty in his expression. When they

found none, they had to smile. He was confident, “You’re right. I’m sorry, I’m just tired.”

“I understand,” Darius clapped a hand against their shoulder a bit harshly, making Raine teeter over slightly in their chair. Darius pulled back and turned to look out the window as well, “Go upstairs and join your little family. Get some rest. I’ll be going to gather my things, I’ll be back shortly.”

Raine smiled sheepishly again, eyes squinting shut and they lifted a hand to rub awkwardly at the back of their head, “Right, sorry for that. I was afraid if I told you the plan over the phone you wouldn’t have come.”

Darius rolled his eyes, “After all we’ve been through and you still have so little faith in me. It’s shameful, really Whispers.”

Raine chuckled, “Sorry.”

Darius turned on their heel to leave, promising he’d be back, “It’s fine, just go on. I’ll see you all tonight, and when I return you all better be well-rested.”

Raine stood then, stumbling a bit as Hunter had, though they didn’t fall, “I can’t promise we’ll be well-rested, but we’ll surely be better than we are now.”

“That’s good enough for now,” He told them, and then he started towards the exit, but before he could leave, Raine called out to him one final time.

“Thank you, Darius. I mean it, truly,” Their voice had lowered to a somehow softer level than they usually spoke, and Darius could practically feel the genuinity in their tone.

He repressed a smile, glancing over his shoulder, “There’s no need for that, I’m happy to help. Let’s just work together to help Hunter, alright?”

Raine nodded, but remained silent, letting Darius take his leave. He left the other to go and join their girlfriend and son(?), closing the front door silently behind him and shutting Hooty up before he could start screaming. He stood on their porch for a moment, looking out at the surrounding woods. It was a clear day; the weather was decent, and it was peaceful. Maybe someday, all will be this calm. He closed his eyes and took a deep and easing breath, preparing himself for what was to come. This would be difficult, but nothing has been easy so far, so why start now?

He opened his eyes and stepped off of the porch, prepared to help his old friends and Hunter. It was time they started putting the pieces back together.

Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

> Darius sleeps on the couch his first night at the Owl House. When he can't sleep, he has a concerning conversation with Hunter over tea and hot cocoa.

Chapter Notes

> hello!! sorry this is so late, today has been. a day lmao. im running on five hours of sleep and dying but i finally got this edited so plz enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sleeping on the couch wasn’t exactly what he had in mind when he moved in for these few days, but it’s where he ended up. It wasn’t an uncomfortable couch, but he did miss his bed back at home. It was fluffy, and warm, and there wasn’t a door worm thing that whistled when it snored. He didn’t sleep well the first night. He tossed and turned and grumbled to himself in irritation. The house wasn’t not peaceful, it was just unfamiliar, and he had a hard time sleeping in unfamiliar places. It didn’t help that he had a lot on his mind anyway.

Hunter had actually slept earlier, and he was still asleep by the time Darius came back with all of his things from his house. Eda and Raine had been with him, sitting on the floor next to the boy’s bed, leaned back against the side of it and using each other as a pillow as they slept upright. They looked rather peaceful, a content little smile on Raine’s face as Eda’s mouth hung open, golden fang exposed as she snored. Darius couldn’t help but smile at the scene. King was curled up at the end of the bed by Hunter’s feet, also fast asleep, and Flapjack had been nestled on the pillow right at Hunter’s head. Hunter himself had been fast asleep along with the rest of them, though his expression was scrunched a bit tightly, as if his dreams were unpleasant. His breathing had been even though, and he was still. Darius didn’t want to disturb him; it was the first time he’d slept in a couple of days, so he left him be.

That had ended up being a mistake.

Hunter had woken everyone with a scream just twenty minutes later. Darius had been downstairs at the time, getting settled in when he heard it, and when he rushed up the stairs and reached the other occupants of the home, he was stricken speechless in the state he found Hunter in. He’d pushed himself off of the bed, blanket halfway on the floor and he’d found himself in a corner. Eda and Raine were keeping their distance, and Hunter had been yelling at them to leave him alone and not to hurt him. His nightmare had sent him spiraling into some terrifying flashback, and it took about fifteen minutes to pull him back into the reality that he was safe and Belos couldn’t hurt him anymore.

The horrible afternoon has been on Darius’ mind since it happened, and now it was prohibiting him from getting a good night’s rest.

He decided to get up after hours of tossing and turning and falling in and out of restless sleep.

Maybe a warm drink would soothe his nerves and help lull him into a semi-peaceful sleep. So now, he was fumbling around in the kitchen, looking through the cupboards and searching for a kettle. Eda didn't seem like a tea person, but he can recall Raine drinking it every now and again back when they were both still in the Emperor's Coven together. Some of the cabinets were neatly organized, though the further he searched the more cluttered they became. It appeared Hunter had stopped halfway through, probably by force. Him and Eda had been here in the kitchen when he arrived earlier, maybe she had stopped him from reorganizing her cupboards just beforehand.

He found a kettle after about five minutes of searching through the Owl Lady's endless amount of kitchen supplies - why did she have so much? - and he filled it with water before setting it on the stovetop and beginning to boil it. While that was going he just needed to find the actual tea. He thought he saw some herbs and spices in a cabinet just a bit ago, maybe it was around there somewhere?

Turns out that, no, it was not. There was something called marshmallow fluff though, whatever that was. Probably something Luz had brought from the human realm; she was always bringing over new things for them all to try. Not long after the events of the Day of Unity and they had all fixed the portal, she had brought over ingredients for something she called *'mac and cheese.'* It was… odd but tasted okay. Hunter wasn't a fan, he claimed it was too slimy. Luckily Luz had been prepared for him in particular not to like it and had made a different meal for him which was just a sandwich but with human realm ingredients and he thoroughly enjoyed that; he'd eaten a lot of those when he had been staying in the human realm apparently. She'd been bringing a lot of things from her realm, things aside from food. She brought books for Hunter and tried to show him a video game from there recently, but he wasn't very good at it and hadn't touched it since. That probably wasn't the game's fault, he'd barely been reading either, or doing anything for leisure for that matter.

But they'd work on that. That's why he's here.

But that was for tomorrow. Where the hell is that damned tea?

He was reaching for the top shelf, moving a box of crackers out of the way to peer behind them when he heard nervous and shuffling footsteps pad into the room. It was dead quiet in here aside from the slight bubbling of the water in the kettle and the creaking of the cabinet door, so of course any little noise would be heard. He turned to look and see who was there, expecting Raine who often paced around when they couldn't sleep well, but instead he was met with those familiar maroon eyes he'd seen too much fear in for far too long.

"Hunter," He said it with a surprised lilt to his tone, and he wasn't sure why he was so shocked by him being up and about this late at night, he'd been having nightmares and sleeping troubles for weeks. Maybe he was just troubled by the fact he couldn't sleep and didn't like seeing him up at this hour.

The boy faltered back a bit, as if afraid by being caught up. He didn't bolt though, he stayed in the doorway, though his eyes shifted to the floor briefly as he found his voice, "Darius, what are you doing up?"

"I should be asking you that question, little one," He said, and Hunter frowned and stayed silent. Darius softened his expression and smiled tiredly, "Come take a seat, I'll make you something to drink."

Hunter remained still for a moment, eyes flicking back and forth between his feet and the space in front of him, and finally he decided to move into the kitchen. His feet covered in the same whale socks from earlier padded into the space and he awkwardly shambled over to the table. He stopped

before he pulled out a chair though, instead placing an unsteady hand on the flat surface of the table and looking towards Darius still rifling through the cabinets with an increasing impatience.

“What are you looking for?” He asked quietly, his voice still raspy and subdued.

Darius didn’t look back at him as he continued through the cabinets, probably fucking them up more than he intended but he’d fix it later, “Tea. I know Raine keeps some around here.”

“It’s in the cabinet to your left, bottom shelf behind the honey,” He offered direction, gesturing to the cabinet on the other side of Darius and the open cabinet door with his hand and arm loosely.

Darius leaned back and looked at the other cabinet, blinking, and then he closed the one he was currently in and moved to the other. With barely moving a thing he found several boxes of different types of tea behind the honey, just where Hunter had said it would be. He smiled and glanced at the boy over his shoulder in gratitude, “Thank you, little one.”

Hunter nodded curtly in a silent *‘you’re welcome’* and then he grabbed the back of a chair and quietly pulled it out, making sure it didn’t squeak across the floor too loudly. Darius pulled down a box of tea, settling on lilyfairy leaf. As he opened the packaging and went about setting aside the tea bag, he asked the boy behind him, “Do you like tea, Hunter?”

He didn’t get an immediate reply, but he was patient. He heard Hunter’s socks rub against the ground as he readjusted himself in his chair, the seat creaking a bit as he moved, and then he answered, “It’s fine.”

That wasn’t really the answer he was looking for, so he asked again, a little firmer, “That’s not a yes or no.”

Hunter was silent again, but for a shorter amount of time, and when he spoke again his voice was smaller and more nervous, “I like hot chocolate.”

The smile on Darius’ lips pulled a bit tighter, and he closed the tea box after pulling out a single bag, “Hot chocolate it is.”

He went on a wild goose chase trying to find all of the ingredients for that as well as two mugs, but with Hunter’s help in directing him he was able to gather everything in a fair manner of time. As the water boiled and the milk for the hot chocolate got warm, Darius leaned back against the counter near the stove and faced Hunter. He wasn’t looking at him, his tired gaze focused on his feet. He was still incredibly tired, and his eyes were probably heavier because of all of the crying he’d been doing earlier in the day after he’d been woken by his nightmare. Darius couldn’t help but feel a twinge of pity for the boy.

“Couldn’t sleep or didn’t want to?” Darius settled on asking, crossing his arms over his chest as he got as comfortable as he could leaning against the hard kitchen counter.

Again, Hunter was quiet as his brain worked on formulating an answer. It was as if he were lagging, like he wasn’t being silent on purpose, but he just couldn’t filter the words he wanted to speak through his head fast enough to speak them on time. He finally shrugged, hands twitching in his lap anxiously, “Both? I think…”

Darius understood, “Did you have another nightmare?” This time Hunter nodded fairly quickly after the question was asked, so Darius followed up with another one, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Hunter was mid-shrug when the tea kettle began to whistle, startling him into tense shoulders and

hands going on guard. His head finally shot up, revealing his wide and bloodshot eyes. His face was red and wet. He'd been crying recently. Darius was quick to get the kettle off of the hot surface, to calm Hunter's nerves and to prevent the shrill noise from waking the other occupants of the house. He moved the kettle to an inactive burner and switched the other one off. When he was finished, he looked over his shoulder at Hunter again, seeing his chest heaving with panicked breaths.

"That bad, huh?" His voice was soft, not wanting to spook him any further.

Hunter didn't answer, but he began trying to calm himself down now that he realized that the sound was only a boiling teapot. Darius turned back to his task, fixing a mug of hot water and setting a tea bag in to seep. As he waited for that, he stirred the milk and added the chocolate. It only took a few minutes for both drinks to be finished. He made the mug for Hunter and disposed of the tea bag before taking both mugs and going to the table to join the tired teenager.

He set his own mug down and then slid Hunter's towards him, "Careful, it's hot."

Hunter nodded a little in acknowledgement and took the mug in both of his hands, holding it between them and keeping it on the table in front of him. The warmth of the mug seemed to soothe him a bit, his expression relaxing just a tad. Darius stirred a spoon in his drink, having added some honey. He was relaxed as he sat at the table, unlike Hunter whose entire body was rigid, expression pulled into an uncomfortable sort of fear.

"Are you alright?" Darius asked gently, keeping his tone low.

Hunter nodded. So, now he was lying.

Darius sighed in slight irritation, "You don't have to pretend to be okay, you know? We've all got our figurative demons, and denial is the easy route to go, sure, but if you talk about what's bothering you it might help. It's always worked out for me, anyway."

Once I stopped being stubborn, of course.

He wasn't expecting Hunter to talk about it right now, it was hard, and Darius understood that. Hunter turned his head, eyes narrowing a bit in irritation as he firmly denied, "I don't want to talk about it."

So, Darius dropped it at that, "Fine by me. But if you ever do feel like talking about it, I'm all ears. So is Eda and Raine and probably anyone else who cares about you."

Hunter's face twitched at those words, and his expression softened. His eyebrows pulled together to form a sort of sad look, and his hands tightened slightly around his mug, "That's… *hard."*

Darius quirked an eyebrow, "What is?"

"People," Hunter answered vaguely, but before Darius could push him for further clarification Hunter went ahead, "Caring about me, I mean."

Of course, this would be hard for him to wrap his head around. It all seemed to click into place before the Day of Unity that Belos never truly cared for him, and since that revelation Hunter has had a hard time learning to accept that other people did care about him. He had trust issues, that was for sure, and it was completely understandable. The man he had praised and looked up to for long ended up not giving a shit about him. Everyone else… Well, he was having a hard time believing any of them when they told him they cared.

“It’s not easy, I understand that,” Darius said, turning his head to look out the window. There wasn’t much to see right now in the middle of the night, it was much too dark to get a clear view of anything but he could see a few firelights here and there buzzing about, “I had a similar issue after my mentor passed on. I refused to open up my heart to anyone. Granted, it’s not the same as your situation, but it’s similar.”

Hunter pushed his gaze to Darius at his words, a curious light in his eyes now as he listened to the man talk. He shifted in his chair, scooting forward a little and posture loosening just a tad, “Your mentor… He was the Golden Guard before me, right?”

Darius smiled softly; the memory of his mentor always brought back a mix of emotions. Some of them were positive, but the negative feelings always seemed to overshadow them. How he’d died, knowing he had probably been so scared. It hurt to think about. But Hunter was asking about him, and if it made him forget about his nightmares for a little while then he’d talk about his mentor.

“He was like an older brother to me,” Darius began, trying to keep the tone light, “His name was Jasper. Belos never called him by his name, probably because he got on his last nerves. He only ever called him *'boy'* from what I can remember.”

He chuckled. He glanced at Hunter and could see that he looked fairly intrigued, so he continued, “He was a great man. Level-headed and even-tempered, it took a lot to make him raise his voice and he never once did it with me. Only time I ever heard him yell was at Belos.”

Hunter’s eyes widened at the shock of that information, “He yelled at Belos?!”

Darius had to laugh at his reaction, a soft and gentle noise, “Yes, he was a brave man. Belos wasn’t so kind to him like he wasn’t kind to you, but Jasper grew fed up. To be fair, he only ever became angry with Belos when I came into the picture. He was awfully protective.”

He paused for a second to stir the honey into his tea. Once he was finished, he pulled the spoon out and tapped it lightly against the rim of the mug, letting the excess liquid run off before he set the spoon aside. He took a drink and set the mug back down, still looking out the window at the gently bouncing firelights.

“It was the first time I came back hurt from a mission that Jasper lost it,” Darius continued, “Now, I had come back with minor injuries before. A bruise here, a scratch there, but nothing major. It was normal to fall and get hurt, but we learn. But one time I broke my arm on a mission I should’ve never gone on in the first place, and that’s when it happened.”

Hunter was pretty interested, but that shouldn’t be surprising. As much as it hurt him, he did want to know more about the grimwalkers before him. He wanted to know if he was a copy or his own person. Everyone else already knew the answer, but he wanted evident proof, “What did Belos do to him?”

He knew Belos wouldn’t have let anyone get away with yelling at him, especially when it was delivered with anger as motivation. And Belos most definitely would not appreciate his creation and pawn calling him out. Darius let his smile fall and he explained the rest, “That’s not where he died, if that’s what you’re wondering. I wasn’t in the room when it happened, but Jasper came out with his mask cracked and his nose was bloody, but Titan did he look pissed.”

Darius laughed, seeming to look back on the memory with not completely negative emotions, “We went to the Healing Coven witches in the medicinal ward together, and he talked shit for lack of a better term about Belos the entire time. He went on and on about how frustrating he was and how it felt good to finally give him what for…”

He trailed off then, his smile back but with a sad overtone to it. Hunter frowned and looked rather perturbed, but he didn't say anything. He just waited for Darius to tell him the rest. It was his memory, he'd let him have time to process the likely heavy emotions that came with it.

"If I knew back then what I knew now I would've thought Belos would've killed him right then and there. Knowing how he treated you…" He trailed off there, refusing to bring up any of Hunter's trauma unless Hunter specifically brought it up, "But he kept him around for a while longer. Not sure what for. Maybe he thought he'd never gotten so far with one of the Golden Guards and thought he'd stick it out with Jasper a little longer, but… It wasn't that long. I was barely grown by the time he was gone."

Hunter remained silent, looking down at his still full mug of hot chocolate with a woeful expression. Darius lifted his mug to his lips again, taking another long swallow of his tea. The ceramic mug was set back down with a gentle clank, and back out the window Darius' gaze settled, "It took me a long time to get over his death. I mourned him for a long time, and I still do. He was like my older brother, he always looked out for me and made sure I was safe. He was a good man."

Hunter chewed on his bottom lip, fingernails chewed down from anxiety, tapping against the mug still resting between his hands, cooling now and still untouched. He opened his mouth, but no words came out, so he closed it again. He took a breath, frowning and tried to push himself to speak, and when he opened his mouth again, he finally forced out pitifully, "He was petrified, right?"

Darius finally tore his eyes from the window, looking at Hunter again. The teenager wasn't looking at him though, instead he was staring at a moisture ring on the table, vehemently looking away from him. Darius was surprised, he almost couldn't believe he'd just heard that, "How did you know that?"

Hunter finally pulled a hand away from his drink, extending his index finger and softly tapping the side of his head, "Saw it in Belos' mind, remember? There was a whole room full of memories of all of the previous Golden Guards… and how they died."

Darius swallowed thickly. That was horrible, and he couldn't help but wonder just how nauseating that was to witness. How explicit were the memories? Were they gorey? He didn't know how the Golden Guards before Jasper died, Jasper had always refused to speak about the one previous to him and he wasn't particularly open about his relationship with Belos. He always brushed aside Darius' worries with a smile, always so kind and stolid.

Darius exhaled, his stomach feeling unsettled now as he was forced to think about the petrification, "Belos… had claimed that he was a traitor to the cause, that he was supporting and using wild magic, enabling the deaths of innocent witches. At the time, I thought I understood Belos' intentions. I was sure wild magic was evil, that it was hurting people, but… No cause was worth killing Jasper. He was the kindest man I'd ever known; he had such a gentle soul… And he was murdered all because of Belos' selfish ideology."

Hunter still refused to look at him. He had pulled both of his hands away from his mug, fingers latched onto the edge of the table. His voice was small and raspy, choked even, and when he spoke Darius thought he heard it waver, "I'm not like him, am I?"

Darius knew why he was asking. He knew he was a replacement, that's the reason he was created. He'd been struggling to come to terms with this. He was likely searching for reassurance, or knowing Hunter, just wanted the truth. So, Darius would give it to him.

"Yes and no," He admitted. He looked at Hunter, *really* looked at him. He had his shoulders hiked

up and he was still avoiding Darius' eyes, ever anxious. Darius was relaxed as he explained it to him, "You're much too strict, you're bad-tempered, and you're as stubborn as a mule."

Hunter just deflated even more with that, bowing his head further to hide his face. He didn't like it when people knew what he was feeling, but Darius already knew his emotions were high. This was just a desperate attempt in thin hopes that he wouldn't bring it up.

"But you're ambitious and focused," Darius continued, dipping his own head a little in an attempt to catch the boy's eyes but with little success. He finished anyway, "You're kind. Always have been. And that is what has always stood out the most about you."

That would've been uplifting at any other time, but Hunter was too focused on being a copy. The previous Golden Guard was a copy too, and the one before him and the one before him. Who knows how many there had been. He didn't have enough time to count all of the dead in the mindscape.

"Am I too similar or too different?" He had to ask. He wanted to know what Darius thought. He knew Darius had distanced himself in the past, and now that he knew what he was it was a simple task to find out why he had done that.

Darius was quiet, looking at Hunter with a thoughtful expression. Back before he joined the rebellion, back before he had learned to cope with the grief and anger that came with losing a brother, he would have answered Hunter's question with *'both.'* He had been different in the ways he mentioned, and it drove him insane, but the ways he was similar, that's what hurt the most. Looking at someone who looked like a smaller version of the man you looked up to most, having to be around someone that reminds you too much of someone you lost. It was hard. But now, that has changed.

Now, he had a different answer.

"Neither," He told him, and finally Hunter lifted his head. He looked at Darius with eyes full of varying emotions, but surprise was prominent in that moment. Darius moved his hand around a bit as he explained in short, "You're not Jasper, little one. I used to think you looked the same and acted the same but when I stopped and actually got to know *you*, I understood you were nothing alike. The way you carry yourself, the way that you are, it's all unique to you. You're your own person. You're Hunter."

Hunter's bottom lip trembled and he bit into it to quell the heavy emotions welling up within him. His eyebrows were knit together tight and his voice was wobbling; he appeared dejected, "But wouldn't you rather have Jasper?"

Darius frowned, eyebrows lowering and mouth falling slightly agape as he tried to figure out why he would say such a thing, "Whatever do you mean?"

Hunter was quick to answer, "If he never died I wouldn't have been created! It would've been for the best, then you'd still have your mentor! Me being here is just another one of *his* horrible mistakes!"

Darius wasn't going to listen to this. He sat up and leaned forward, abandoning his relaxed position. Hunter leaned back a bit, making a sound of alarm when Darius got closer. Darius stopped when he was eye level with the boy, and he spoke firmly. Hunter needed to get this through his head.

"Now you listen here and you listen well," He made sure his tone didn't signify anger or anything

negative such as that, he just kept it firm and steady yet calm, “I do miss Jasper, I won’t lie. He was very important to me, but so are you. What happened to Jasper is in the past, there’s nothing I can do to change it, and even if there was, there is nothing that could tempt me to get rid of you. You’re an important person in my life, Hunter. I care about you and I want you here. Do you understand?”

Hunter had started crying somewhere in the middle of that, and he was trying so hard to keep quiet, but it wasn’t working. He gasped and choked, sniffling and forcing out an apology, “I’m sorry!”

Darius nearly fell out of his chair to get to Hunter, falling to his knees in front of the now sobbing teenager and carefully pulling him into his arms. Hunter was quick to wrap his arms around him, burying his face against his neck and shoulder and sobbing hard. Darius held a hand against his back, feeling it shake and heave with the force of his cries, and he put his other hand on the back of Hunter’s head and thread his fingers through his already disheveled blonde hair. He could feel his sleep shirt getting wet with tears and snot, but he didn’t care. Hunter needed to let this out, and he was more than willing to be the outlet for him to do that on.

He felt Hunter’s fingers dig into his back, pulling tight on his shirt as he clung to him with everything he had, as if he were afraid he’d disappear if he let him go. But Darius wasn’t going anywhere, none of them were. They were here for the long haul; they’d be there for him whenever he needed it. He would be okay now, they’d protect him. He was safe.

“It’s alright now, little one. I’m right here with you,” He assured him, rubbing a hand against his back and frowning at the feeling of his spine beneath his shirt, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Hunter sobbed against him, shifting and pushing his forehead against his broad shoulder, “I-I’m sorry, Darius! I’m trying to get better, I promise!”

“I know. You’re doing your best, and that’s good enough,” He promised him, tilting his head over to lean against Hunter’s. He could feel him trembling as he held him in his arms, his skin warm with fever. He’d have to try and get him to eat something in the morning, first thing was first though. He needed to sleep.

He didn’t remove him from his arms though, not quite yet. Hunter was holding on tight, desperate for a comforting touch and Darius was happy to deliver. The kid had gone his whole life knowing nothing but hurt and fear, but that had all changed now, he was just having a difficult time accepting all of these new and unfamiliar feelings. Hunter didn’t say anything else the rest of the time he stayed there, and with the soothing feeling of Darius threading his fingers through his hair and the comforting pressure of arms around him, he slowly began to calm down.

He stopped sobbing after a few minutes of rubbing tears and snot into Darius’ shirt; he’d need to have a laundry day sooner than he thought if this trend kept up, which he was sure it might. His breathing eventually became even, and as the room became silent, Hunter began to feel heavier in his arms. Darius raised an eyebrow at this, and he pulled his hand away from his back and pushed it against his side, shaking him very slightly, “Hunter?”

He didn’t reply with words, just even breathing that came out as a quiet snore at being rustled. He’d fallen asleep. Darius couldn’t believe it, but then again, he hadn’t slept well in days, so he was virtually exhausted. He can also remember Luz mentioning something like this. She had said after all was said and done after the Day of Unity and they had gotten back home, she had given Hunter a hug and he fell right asleep. Apparently, the pressure was comforting enough and when he remained in someone’s arms long enough he was out like a light. Darius had to smile.

He adjusted his legs underneath them, moving them so he could slide a foot onto the floor, and he

began pushing himself into standing. He brought Hunter with him, and the kid didn't budge the whole time. He really was out. How long had he gone without sleep again? Two days? Three? Raine had mentioned it at dinner, a meal that Hunter barely touched and excused himself from to go upstairs and be with Flapjack.

Darius turned Hunter a bit so he had a better grip, and then he leaned down and wrapped an arm under his legs, the other holding him around his back. He hoisted him up into his arms, holding him carefully and adjusting his arm around his back a bit to make sure he was comfortable. Hunter's head lulled to lean against his shoulder, and as Darius looked upon him he thought this was the most peaceful expression he's seen on the kid's face in a long time. He had thought about taking him back upstairs and putting him in his own bed, but he'd had such a good talk with him, he even thinks he broke through that stubborn barrier of his a little bit. Hunter trusted him enough to fall asleep against him like this, so he decided to let him stay down here on the couch with him for the night. It was a comfy couch, anyway. At least the Owl Lady had good taste in furniture.

He turned to leave the kitchen, glancing at the two mugs still sitting on the table. He had drank at least half of the tea. Hunter never even touched his. That was fine, he'd make sure he got some food and drink in him in the morning, but now he was resting. Titan knows he needs it. He left the kitchen and made his way back towards the couch, maneuvering around the coffee table as carefully as he could but he ended up slamming his shin into the edge of it anyway. He clenched his jaw to keep himself from shouting, instead cursing under his breath; Hunter didn't even budge. He sighed in relief as he made it around the coffee table, ignoring the throbbing pain in his leg. He bent forward and gently deposited Hunter onto the couch, pulling his arms out from under him and holding them in front of him for a second, hovering and making sure the boy stayed asleep. When he did, Darius let his shoulders relax. He looked towards the door to the kitchen, debating whether or not he should go back in there and clean up the mugs and kettle and general mess he'd made. Hunter mumbled something in his sleep, pulling Darius' attention away from the kitchen and back towards him. His face was scrunched up slightly and he moved his hands, fingers twitching.

He'd clean up in the morning. Staying here with Hunter was his priority right now.

He sank to the couch, grabbing the blanket from the end of it where he'd kicked it off of his legs earlier, and he pulled it up to cover both him and Hunter, laying down next to the sleeping teenager. He smacked the pillow behind their heads a couple of times, fluffing it up and getting comfortable. He laid on his back and closed his eyes, feeling fairly snug here. He didn't have as much room now as he did earlier, but that was okay. Hunter was sleeping, which made him content enough to sleep slightly uncomfortable.

He'd only had his eyes closed for a minute when Hunter whimpered, and he felt his hand gently smack his side. He rolled his head, blinking away the sleep in his eyes and studying the kid. Something was bothering him in his dreams, and Darius knew what it was, and he knew his name. He frowned, a crease forming between his eyebrows. He pulled his arm out from between him and Hunter, brushing blonde hair out of his face, touch gentle. He was quiet when he spoke, "It's alright. You're safe, little one."

What happened next startled Darius. Hunter, still completely asleep, rolled somewhat onto his side and leaned into Darius. His fingers gripped onto the side of his shirt, tugging gently, as if he was aware in a way that someone who would keep him safe was present. Darius' eyes went wide. This was new. He'd never been the paternal type; he didn't think so anyway. He almost didn't know how to react to this, but he thought back on what Raine had always done. They had been a teacher; they were used to being around kids and they knew how to treat them. Gently. Carefully. Darius moved his arm slowly, still unsure, but he was able to maneuver his arm around Hunter's shoulders again. His hand was hesitant, barely touching him. In the kitchen he had hugged him so easily, but

the emotions had been high, and the things Hunter was saying were concerning. He had been crying and Darius couldn't stand to see it. Now, Hunter was asleep and deeply too. For some reason, he was tentative.

Hunter made another small noise of fear or sadness, maybe it was pain. Darius frowned somehow deeper, and he sighed. He supposes taking on this fatherly role was something he was committing to now. Curse Raine and their influence. He set his hand on Hunter's shoulder, cradling him against him and when Hunter mumbled something concerning again, Darius pulled his other hand up and gently carded it through his hair. It took a minute, but after a few soft ministrations through his blonde locks he noticeably relaxed. Okay, this was progress.

He stayed awake for a little while longer, making sure Hunter remained in his mostly peaceful slumber. When about twenty minutes went by without a whine or a mumble coated thickly in fear, Darius decided he should sleep too. He closed his eyes, exhaling deeply and feeling more comfortable than before with the reassurance that Hunter was finally resting. It was a comforting thought to know he was getting the rest he needed, and if any nightmares disturbed him then Darius would be there to wake him up and be there to help him calm back down. But that didn't happen, the night went on uninterrupted.

For the first time in a long time, Hunter slept peacefully.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading!! leave a review and let me know what you think!! chapter three will be up saturday!! until then, have a good day/night!! <3

Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

> After a long night of helping Hunter through a breakdown, Darius wakes up and has a talk with Raine.

Chapter Notes

> hi there!! sorry for posting so late again, i got distracted lol. this chapter is slightly more lighthearted than the previous two, but the next one will be the angst and hurt/comfort heavy chapter of the fic. i hope u enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He woke up when the sun began peeking through the windows, the rays hitting him in the face and becoming too bright for his eyes to ignore. He groaned at the rude awakening, the heat from the sun making it a bit too warm under the blanket that lay over him. He glared sleepily at the window, lifting a hand to cover his eyes and blinking rapidly to clear his blurry early morning vision. He rubbed at one of his eyes that remained foggy longer than the other, then he dropped his hand and it hit something that he just now realized was on top of him.

He rolled his head against his pillow, and suddenly the memory of the night prior came flashing through his mind. The late-night tea, the emotional breakdown in the kitchen that had followed a much-needed discussion, and finally the kid had fallen asleep. Hunter was cushioned between Darius and the back of the couch, half laying on top of him and arms draped across his midsection. His mouth hung slightly agape, and his breathing was even, his chest rising and falling at a normal rate for once. His face didn't look as flushed, and when Darius lifted a hand and pressed the back of it to Hunter's forehead, he didn't feel a fever. It put a smile on his face, tired as it was.

Good. The kid deserved this.

Darius was a bit too warm here, feeling sweat starting to bead on his forehead from the sun shining down on him. He also just remembered there were dirty dishes in the kitchen that he hadn't had the chance to clean up last night. He needed to fix all of that up before the others got up to come and make breakfast. But he didn't want to disturb Hunter.

He had to be careful.

He grabbed Hunter's arm and moved it off of him, being careful so he didn't disrupt the only good sleep he's had in weeks. He didn't react to Darius moving his arm away, remaining peacefully asleep. That was the easy part, the difficult part was next. His own arm was wrapped around Hunter's shoulder, his hand pressed between his back and the couch. He had to be careful when moving here, because he really didn't want to wake him up. He very slowly slid his hand out from between the sleeping teenager and the back of the couch, making sure not to make any sudden movements that would startle him awake. He did end up getting his hand free, so then he began maneuvering his arm out from around Hunter's shoulders. It took him a minute and some mindful

wiggling of his arm, but he got that free too and with only a slightly disgruntled groan in response from Hunter. He sighed in relief and sat up, getting off of the couch and to his feet.

He pressed his hands to his lower back and bent backwards a little, cracking his spine and stretching. He grunted sleepily as he stretched his lax muscles, and when he was done, he let his body slump a bit and he yawned. He got better sleep last night than he was expecting, not counting waking up around two to go and drink tea and have a deep talk with a traumatized teenager.

He exhaled and looked at Hunter. His expression was serene and for once he was relaxed. It made Darius smile, happy to see him calm for a change. He was so focused on the kid that he didn't even hear the footsteps behind him and didn't even know there was someone else in the room until they spoke, "I figured this was where he'd end up."

Darius turned around, startled by the voice but quickly relaxing when he saw it was only Raine. He exhaled, expression letting up as he replied, "Did you now?"

Raine smiled tiredly, eyes still full of sleep and lines under their eyes showing they'd only woken up just moments ago, "He likes you, always has. He looks up to you, as well. Don't tell me you never noticed how he tried to make you proud."

Darius looked to Hunter again, still so unbothered, mouth hanging slightly agape as he breathed evenly, "Well, he never had to try so hard. I don't know how I could be prouder of him than I am now."

Raine smiled at his words, mostly at how soft he said them. They pressed a finger to the bridge of their glasses and pushed them back up onto their face, settling them more securely over their eyes. They dropped both their hands and gestured for Darius to follow them into the kitchen, "Come on, I'll make you some tea."

Raine left to go to the kitchen and Darius followed, though he faltered for a moment and glanced at Hunter again. His chest was rising and falling gently, he looked calm. He smiled. This was good. He turned to go after Raine, leaving the sleeping teen to get a little more rest. Titan knows he deserved it.

Raine pushed the door open, and they both went in. They stopped and smirked knowingly at the table where two mugs sat, chairs pushed around sort of haphazardly, "How did it go?"

Darius brought a hand up to rub the back of his neck, shrugging with one shoulder and inhaling between his teeth, "I think I made somewhat of a breakthrough."

Raine raised an eyebrow, intrigued, "Oh really?"

Darius dropped his arm back to his side as he explained, "He wanted to know about Jasper."

"The previous Golden Guard? Your mentor Jasper?" Raine questioned, eyes widening a bit in surprise.

Darius nodded, "I mean, it's not surprising, is it? He's going to be curious about the others. I may not know much about the Golden Guards before Jasper, but I told him what I could about him."

Raine moved further into the kitchen, going towards the table as they listened to what Darius was telling them, "And how did that go?"

"He was interested, I could tell that much," He went on, eyes focusing on a spot on the floor, "He got somewhat self-deprecating at the end though, but that's not new for him, is it? Oh, Raine, don't

do that, I'll clean this up."

He walked over to the table, taking the mugs before Raine could and turning to go towards the sink. Raine furrowed their eyebrows at the sight of the contents of the one mug, "Hunter didn't drink his, did he?"

Darius frowned and shook his head, moving towards the sink to wash the dishes, "He kind of… had a breakdown of sorts."

That wasn't surprising, "I see… But it all ended okay?"

Darius nodded curtly as he set the mugs in the sink, turning on the taps, "He let me hug him, and he cried for a while. All ended well though, he uh, fell asleep in my arms."

Raine snickered, holding a hand up in front of their mouth to barely hide a smile, "Yes, he does that. He did that with me and Eda too. And Luz of course, several times. He likes hugs."

Darius smirked, "Yes, Luz told me about that. She said he fell asleep in her arms post-Day of Unity shenanigans."

Raine chuckled again and pushed one of the chairs closer to the table, taking a seat in it as Darius cleaned up the dishes from the night before, "He's a good kid."

Darius chuckled a soft sound, having to agree, "That he is."

Raine tapped their fingernails against polished wood, leaning their cheek against their palm, "Did he have any nightmares last night?"

Darius was quick to respond with a shake of his head, "No. He barely even budged. Maybe the talk was good for him. He needed to open up a little."

Raine smirked, "I knew asking you to come here was a good idea."

Darius had his hand submerged in soap and water when he furrowed his eyebrows, curious by Raine's words, "You really think he opened up just because it was me he spoke to?"

Raine sat up, crossing their arms and folding one leg over the other, "He's known you longer than any of the rest of us. He trusts you, even if he can't acknowledge that consciously."

Darius set a mug in the drainer, and he frowned, "I'm not sure why, honestly. I wasn't… *kind* to him, a good portion of his life."

Raine frowned too, but not unhappily, "It was hard for you, Darius. He looks a lot like your mentor."

"That's no excuse," Darius said as he scrubbed the other mug, "I was dealing with trauma, but I had no right to blame that on him. He was just a kid… He still is."

Raine exhaled deeply, watching Darius wash up the dishes in a slightly frenzied way, "We've all made mistakes. Me and Eda have had our troubles, we didn't handle things the best at times, but we still trust and love each other. I don't think Hunter holds a grudge against you."

Darius shook his head and scowled, "Well, he should."

Raine frowned and watched Darius as he continued to scrub at the dishes, his movements aggressive, bordering on angry. Raine pursed their lips into a thin line. Of course, Darius was

thinking about the past. After Hunter ran off after the entire mindscape incident Darius had worried himself sick over the boy, wondering where he'd gone, what he could have done better in the past to have kept that from ever happening. They both logically knew that Hunter was always going to find out, whether that be by force or by accident, and he was always going to handle it with a varying range of negative emotions. But Darius wanted to protect him, he didn't want the kid to go through any more than he already had. He'd had a rough cut in life, and Darius wanted him to be happy. He thought if he had done better in the past to protect him then all of this would have been a little easier, but it didn't work that way and they can't go back to change it. It's best to live with the past and work on the future.

"He looks up to you, you know?" Raine told him, and that made the man at the sink pause, hands still submerged in soap and water. Raine readjusted in their seat, asking, "What? You've never noticed?"

Darius' face contorted into several different expressions, and finally his eyebrows pulled together, and he pouted in curiosity, a little bit of confusion poking at him too, "And why would he look up to *me?"*

Raine smiled again, head leaning against their palm, "You can't be serious," They sighed when Darius looked over his shoulder to give them an incredulous look, and then they explained, "You're a powerful Coven Head who knows how to stand up for himself, didn't you ever watch Hunter when he was on duty as the Golden Guard? He talked just like you."

Darius made a face, "Am I really that cocky?"

Raine chuckled, "Yes, you are. And aside from that, you were one of the only positive role models he had. He surely didn't get his kindhearted nature from Belos."

That's true, but, "You were around too. You're much kinder than me."

"I'm more gentle, sure, but I didn't spend nearly as much time with him as you did," They told him, "If he was hurt, you were there acting like you didn't care but always patching him up. You've sent him out on *'missions'* to keep him from interacting with Belos on that man's worst days, and you often made sure he got to his quarters safely. You've always looked out for him, you just had to keep your affection quiet or else the Emperor would find out lest he end up as carefree as the previous Golden Guard."

Darius flinched at the mention of him still, and he turned his gaze back to the soapy sink. He gently chewed on his bottom lip, frowning and thinking, and then he exhaled deeply, "Don't get it twisted. It wasn't just because I had to keep my position secure and rebel plans secret that I kept him at a distance. I truly detested him for some time."

Raine rolled their eyes, "I don't believe that for a second."

Darius pulled his hands out of the sink and dried them with the hand towel just off to the side on the counter, spinning around gently to face Raine sitting at the table still, "I'm not lying, Raine. I was horrible to him. I mocked him and belittled him. He didn't deserve that on top of the way Belos was already treating him… I'll never forgive myself for that."

Raine was frowning again. They couldn't change Darius' mind on this, and maybe they shouldn't. This was something that he needed to deal with, and he needed to talk about it with Hunter. Raine knew Darius never meant to hurt the boy, but even so he probably still did. Raine also knew though that Hunter didn't hold it against him. Raine shouldn't interfere either way, this wasn't their issue. So, they backed out.

“I suppose that’s something you should discuss with Hunter then,” They said, sitting up and then leaning back in their seat, dropping their hand to the tabletop and drumming their fingernails against it, “Sit down, Darius. Let me make some tea.”

Darius huffed and narrowed his eyes in slight irritation, “I can do it.”

“You were just in the process of rubbing your fingers raw,” Raine gestured with a tilt of their head towards Darius’ reddened fingertips, something the man looked at and then tried to hide by folding his hands over each other; he looked a bit sheepish. Raine smiled softly, “Please, allow me. I enjoy making tea anyhow, it’s soothing.”

Darius stared at them for a second, and then he sighed and slumped his shoulders, gesturing towards the stove and clean dishes he’d just washed up, “Be my guest.”

Raine stood and chuckled, curled fingers going to their face to cover their mouth a bit, an old habit of theirs, “Technically, you’re my guest.”

Darius rolled his eyes and nudged the other playfully as they passed each other, “Don’t be cheeky.”

He went over to the table and took a seat, crossing his leg over the other and directing his gaze to the window. The sky had a pretty pinkish hue to it as the sun rose. The weather had begun to cool a little, but not too much. It usually didn’t get too cold here in the Boiling Isles, not unless you were situated on the Knee. Classes at Hexide started up very soon, and he was wondering how that would go.

“He’s going to Hexide, correct?” Darius asked as Raine prepared to make them some drinks.

They smiled as they worked, nodding, “Yes! Me and Eda are a bit nervous because of how distant he’s been. Luz is coming back this week though, so we’re hoping she can also help.”

Darius hummed in thought, “I hope you’re right.”

Raine was still smiling that soft smile of theirs, sure that everything would work out the way it was supposed to, “It will. Have faith.”

He did have faith, perhaps he was just worried. Or maybe he was stuck in his head about how Hunter had been treated by most everyone, himself included. He was probably being a little too hard on himself, but he couldn’t help but wonder how Hunter felt about it all. He drummed his fingers against the tabletop a little harsher as everything else fell silent. Raine flipped on the burner after they finished drying off the tea kettle, setting it on the stovetop and boiling some water. Darius heard the crinkling of a cardboard box as Raine pulled out the tea they wanted. He hoped it didn’t take too long to prepare; he could really go for some calming tea right about now.

The door to the kitchen creaked and quiet footsteps padded in sort of sheepishly. Both pairs of eyes already in the room turned their attention to the new presence, seeing the boy they were just speaking of standing awkwardly at the doorway. Raine smiled, “Hunter, good morning! Would you like something warm to drink?”

Hunter blinked away the sleep in his eyes, looking a bit startled by the other two in the room despite their voices being the reason he’d been pulled from his slumber, “Um… Yeah, sure. That sounds nice.”

“Great, have a seat,” Raine said with the same kind smile, gesturing to the table where Darius sat with a gentle swoop of their hand.

Hunter stepped over to the table, footsteps a bit clumsy from the drowsiness still hanging over him. He grabbed the back of a chair and pulled it out, taking a seat and sitting quietly, not raising his eyes to look at Darius. Darius watched him with a careful gaze, one leg over the other and he exhaled deeply before asking, “How did you sleep?”

Hunter blinked at the question, as if clearing his foggy head. He awkwardly wrung his hands in his lap, his stature oddly stiff; it’s like he was nervous, “Fine.”

So, he *was* nervous. Darius should’ve figured. He’d had a breakdown in front of him last night, he was probably still thinking about it. Darius knew something like that could be embarrassing, he remembers what it was like being young and feeling alone. Granted, they experienced childhood much differently, but Hunter’s awkward feelings were partially relatable.

Darius looked back out the window, watching the leaves rustle from the slight breeze blowing them about. It was nice out; it had been for the past week or more. Perfect walking weather. So, Darius proposed something to the teenager, “I think I may go for a walk after breakfast and go to the shore. Would you like to go with me, Hunter?”

His eyes widened a fraction, like he was surprised by the offer. He looked at Darius and stammered a second, “I-I uh, I mean—”

“Oh, that sounds nice,” Raine cut in, trying to gently nudge Hunter into taking up Darius’ offer; he’s not been away from the house in quite some time, “The weather has been tame lately, I think you should go. You like being outside, don’t you, Hunter?”

He opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, and then his eyes fell from the room and zoned in on the tabletop in front of him; he nodded an affirmative, “I like to read out there…”

“Then you should bring a book along. The beach is always such a peaceful place to read, at least I’ve always thought so,” Darius said with a small smile, trying to encourage him.

Hunter nodded again, “Okay, I’ll bring one.”

He still seemed anxious, but he had at least agreed to go with him on a walk so Darius was going to take that. He looked at Raine across the kitchen, and they grinned and gave him a silent thumbs up, happy he’d gotten Hunter to agree to do something besides sit inside and mope all day. The kitchen fell silent after that, Raine making their drinks and setting up the coffee for Eda for when she woke up. They handed out tea for Darius and a hot cocoa to Hunter, who to their delight actually took a few sips of it. Raine sipped on their tea as they went about making breakfast, griffin eggs and pancakes. Pancakes had become a favorite in the home since Luz had introduced them, and with any luck maybe Hunter would eat one this morning.

After a few minutes of peaceful silence and drinking their warm drinks the door to the kitchen slammed open and Hunter was startled when something soft landed on his head. He stiffened for a moment out of reflex but as soon as he heard the familiar chirping he relaxed, watching calmly as the little red bird fluttered down in front of him and landed on the table.

“Good morning, Flapjack,” He reached out and rubbed a thumb against the top of her head, and she seemed to smile and lean into his touch. He smiled a little back at her, a little light reaching his eyes as he stroked the bird’s feathers.

Darius felt the corners of his lips be tugged up into a little tired smile at the sight, but soon he was frowning again when Eda and Raine’s other kid started running around and yelling. King burst into the room and ran around, shouting at everyone around, “Everyone’s up before me?! Blasphemy!”

Darius wasn't even sure King knew what that word meant but he sure did yell it a lot. King climbed into the chair next to Hunter and sniffed the air, then he peered down into the mug sitting in front of the blonde, "Hot chocolate?! Raine, you didn't make me any?"

Raine chuckled, "Of course, I did. It's right here, come and get it."

They grabbed a mug from near the coffee machine, lowering it so King could grab it from their hand. The little demon hopped out of his chair and ran over to retrieve his sweet drink before returning to the table and sitting next to Hunter again. He kicked his little legs and giggled, blowing on the drink that had probably already cooled sufficiently for him to drink safely.

"King, what do we say when people make us things? We've talked about this," Eda's sluggish and tired voice droned as she came into the kitchen, hand on her lower back and rubbing at a knot there.

"Thank you!" King chirped and smiled at Raine, who chuckled in response.

"You're welcome, King," They replied to him, and then they directed their attention towards Eda who was popping her back, "Good morning, darling."

They didn't miss the rosy hue that flushed her cheeks at the nickname, but she smiled at it in the end and made her way over to them with a greeting in return, "'Mornin, hot stuff."

Not as charming, but to Raine it was everything. They laughed and Eda leaned down to press a kiss to their lips as they scrambled the eggs. Everyone had been watching, and Hunter and King both made sounds and faces of disgust at the sight. Raine laughed at the boys while Eda rolled her eyes and went to make herself a cup of coffee. As she filled a mug, she looked over her shoulder at Hunter and had to ask, "Where'd you run off to last night, kid? Your bird there was freaking out when we woke up and you weren't there."

"Oh, sorry Flapjack," Hunter apologized to his palisman but she only chirped happily and leaned into his hand. He looked over at Eda and shrugged loosely, "I got thirsty and came to get a drink. Fell asleep on the couch after that."

Eda nodded her head as she listened to what he had to say, then she raised an eyebrow, "But… Darius had the couch last night. Oh," She realized what she had said, and then she smiled and tilted her head, *"Awwww."*

Hunter's face and ears were on fire, and he was honestly glad that Darius woke up before he did because he would've exploded or something if he woke up to being held. Just the thought alone was making his face burn redder. He tried to glare at Eda, but he couldn't manage, so instead he just stammered out, "S-Stop it!"

Darius chuckled at the entire scene, garnering Hunter's attention to him, "What are you so flustered for? You're the one who fell asleep halfway through a hug."

Hunter's ears had flattened against his head, and he was able to narrow his eyes slightly at the man at least, "They're— They're comfortable, okay?!"

Darius chuckled a warm sound, "Apparently so."

Hunter was too tired for this, so he shut his mouth and sunk lower into his chair, pouting. He looked like a toddler with a look on his face like that, but it was amusing, and the moment was lighthearted, which they all appreciated after the past few months of high stress. Raine pushed the conversation away from teasing Hunter, bringing a platter of pancakes and large bowl of eggs to the table, Eda bringing plates and her mug of coffee behind them. Raine clapped their hands

together gently, and Hunter tried to hide a flinch, “Eat up everyone! I worked really hard on this!”

Darius looked at the food set in the middle of the table, steam still rising from it all. He smiled at the sight of it and looked to the one who had prepared it all, “Thank you, Raine. It looks delicious.”

Raine smiled back and took a seat themself, sitting between Darius and Eda and waiting for everyone else to fix their plate before they made theirs. They all tried not to let their eyes linger when Hunter put some eggs and a pancake on his plate, and they tried to hide their smiles when he took a bite. Instead, they tried to distract themselves from how delighted they were that he was eating by making conversation.

“Luz will be back this weekend, I bet she’s excited to see all of you again,” Eda said after swallowing down a mouthful of griffin eggs.

King slammed his little clawed hands down onto the table, silverware and plates rattling at the force of it and Hunter flinching next to him, “Finally! It’s been ages!”

“She visited a couple of weeks ago,” Eda reminded him, deadpan.

King narrowed his eyes, “Yeah, but she’s been gone since then! I was starting to think she forgot about me.”

Eda rolled her eyes, “She’s been busy.”

“Yeah, busy visiting her Ab— Abala— Her uh—” He was having a hard time remembering the word Luz always used when talking about this person, but luckily Hunter remembered like he remembered practically everything.

“Her Abuela,” Hunter supplemented, not looking up from his plate as he chewed and swallowed his third bite.

“Yeah, that! But what does Abuela have that I don’t?” He cried, throwing his arms around before inevitably crossing them.

Hunter furrowed his eyebrows, quipping back a bit teasingly, “Uh, grandmother status?”

He said it through a mouthful of eggs and King’s always short temper didn’t like Hunter’s smart mouth. He stood in his chair and smacked at the older boy, making those pitiful little whining sounds as he did so, paw pushing against Hunter’s cheek as the blonde grumbled and complained as he tried to push him away.

“Enough,” Darius rolled his eyes, drawing a circle in the air and abomination goo rose up to grab King around the waist and pull him away from the teenager, setting him back down in his seat.

Eda scolded the youngest, “King, we’ve talked about this. Be nice to your brother.”

“He started it!” King accused, pointing a claw at the blonde.

“I literally didn’t,” Hunter replied, looking incredulous at King’s accusation but there was pink dusting his cheeks and ears at Eda’s comment.

King stood again to attack and Hunter flinched when he put his paws up, and Darius used a spell to pull the boy back down again, “You are an unruly child. Two peas a pod, you two are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hunter sounded like he was complaining, and the look on his face reminded Darius of the one he used to get back in the day. Back when he was a little smugger, a little more demanding. He hadn’t been happy, but it was the little things he did when he was in the presence of people he trusted.

Darius fought at a smirk, “You know exactly what I mean, little one.”

Hunter glared at him, but it was slight and tired, it barely even qualified as a glare. Darius went back to eating his breakfast, hiding an amused smile, and Hunter took another bite as well. There was a quiet that fell over the table for a moment, and then Raine and Eda started up a conversation about school starting again soon. They tried to get Hunter’s opinion on it, and King asked if he was allowed to go to school.

“You’re too young for Hexide,” Raine told him, which earned them complaining from the boy.

“What? But Gus went there when he was my age!” King shouted.

“That’s not true, he was still older than you, and also Gus is a prodigy,” Eda reminded him before scooping a forkful of eggs into her mouth.

“Ugh, that’s not fair! I want to hang out with all of my friends too like Hunter and Luz do…” He slumped his shoulders and sunk back against the chair he was sitting in, bowing his head to pout.

Raine and Eda both frowned, and Hunter glanced at the younger boy and frowned too. He set his fork down for a moment, grabbing his napkin and wiping his hands before trying to reassure King, “They’ll be coming over after school like they used to, so you can see them all then.”

King looked at Hunter, eyes growing bigger with hope, “Really? They’ll still do that?”

Hunter made a face and shrugged loosely, “Why wouldn’t they?”

King shrugged too, only his shoulders remained hiked up a bit, making him look smaller than he already was; he still looked sad, “Well… They’re all getting older, I just thought they wouldn’t want to hang out with a little kid anymore… I thought going to school would make me like them and then maybe… I don’t know, it’s dumb.”

Eda frowned and leaned down to be on King’s level, taking a more serious tone to get through to him, “King, all of these kids love you. You don’t have to go to school with them to be their friend.”

“But I’m—”

“Being young doesn’t mean you can’t be their friend,” Eda assured him, hoping to get this through his head.

“Yes, Hunter is older than you and he’s still your friend,” Raine supplemented encouragingly, tilting their head to nudge Hunter into saying something.

His maroon eyes widened a fraction and he nodded, stammering over his own words, “Y-Yeah! I’m your friend, and I’m the oldest out of all of us. If I can be your friend, then the others can too.”

He wasn’t very good at this kind of thing he didn’t think, but he tried his best. He wasn’t expecting King to get down in the dumps over breakfast, but the demon did have unexpected mood swings. Maybe it was a demon thing? Or maybe it was just a kid thing? Hunter wouldn’t know either way.

His little affirmation seemed to work though, because King smiled something gleeful up at him,

“Thanks Hunter, I’m glad.”

Hunter shrugged stiffly, feeling sort of awkward now, “I’m just saying what I’m feeling. That’s what… I was told I should do.”

Eda rolled her eyes, but she did make sure to look a bit amused about the whole situation, “Don’t make it sound like an order, kid.”

“Right, sorry,” Hunter apologized, dipping his head and poking at his food, not even a half-eaten pancake and a mostly stacked pile of eggs.

“You know,” King began, relaxing once again and grabbing his fork, chopping a pancake with it before he smiled up at Hunter, “You’re a pretty great big brother.”

And there was that word again. *Brother.* Hunter’s breath hitched in his throat in surprise at what King said and he felt his face burn red again, ears flushing a bit too. It wasn’t out of embarrassment or flattery though, no, all he felt in his gut was the tight and uncomfortable feeling of shame. He wasn’t worthy of a title such as that. He didn’t feel like a great big brother, he didn’t feel like anything at all to anyone.

All of this kindness he’d been receiving, all of this smothering, it had been too much. The room suddenly felt suffocating, as if all of the air had been sucked out of it when King had said that to him. Looking at the food on his plate he suddenly felt nauseous. He couldn’t finish this. He put his hands on the table, standing suddenly, chair legs screeching against the hard floor in protest of the quick movement. The others around the table looked alarmed at first, and then that feeling slipped away and was replaced with concern. They were always so concerned.

“Hunter? Are you okay?” Raine asked, folding their napkin and setting it aside, beginning to stand. Before they could though Hunter spoke up to stop them.

“I’m fine. I’m just—” He didn’t really know what to say actually, he had no excuse, so he simply asked, “Darius, can we go on that walk now?”

He’d already promised he’d go, if he backed out now, he might be in trouble. He could do for some fresh air anyway, maybe it would help with the nausea that constantly seemed to hang over him.

Darius frowned, eyebrows pulling together and making him look a bit bothered, “Aren’t you going to finish your meal?”

Hunter quickly answered with a firm shake of his head and the movement proved too quick and he had to swallow to dispel the thick feeling in his throat, “I’m not hungry.”

They were all worried. He had been doing so well this morning, but something had triggered him. Pushing him for answers right now would most likely only lead to upsetting him further though, so for now Darius nodded, “Yes, I suppose we can go. Let me just clean this up and then we’ll—”

“Great. I’ll go get a book,” And then he was turning and leaving the kitchen in a hurry.

The room was left in silence after he left, and everyone shared a look except for Darius who only stared at the swinging kitchen door that Hunter had just exited through. He lifted his cup to take a sip of tea, thinking through his next course of action. This boy was tricky, always on edge and alert. But he was in there, the Hunter who laughed and smiled and got a smart mouth and rambled away. There was a glimpse of him this morning when he bickered with King, and with patience there would be more of him in due time. He would come around. Slowly, but surely. Even still, there was work to be done and that was obviously scary for Hunter. This walk though seemed to be

as good a starting place as any.

“Darius?” Raine’s voice cut through his thoughts, and he blinked and looked towards the couple looking sad and concerned, their son sitting next to them looking the same.

Darius offered them a smile, reassuring and calm, “Patience. This is progress. He’s willing to leave the house, and that’s a step in the right direction.”

Raine leaned over the table a bit, reaching out a hand and setting it on Darius’ wrist. He looked down at their hand resting on his arm, their hold firm yet somehow still gentle. He lifted his eyes a moment later to meet Raine’s, and the look in their eyes was almost heartbreaking to see, “Keep an eye on him. We worry about him near the water.”

Darius blinked, confused, “What do you mean by that?”

“Just…” Raine sighed through their nose, somewhat irritated, as if they didn’t want to explain, or maybe they were too upset to, “Watch him close, okay? Promise me.”

Darius nodded, still confused but if Raine was worried about it then he’d take their concerns seriously, “Alright, I promise. I won’t let anything bad happen to him, you know that.”

Raine smiled, tight-lipped. They patted Darius’ arm before pulling their hand away, “I trust you.”

Darius smiled a little in return, leaning back in their chair again and trying to relax, “I’ll talk to him out there, keep his mind busy. He hasn’t rambled my ear off in quite some time, maybe I can convince him into doing that.”

Eda chuckled, “That sure would be a treat. I’d do anything to hear him chatter on and on about human birds again.”

“Or the glyphs Luz is teaching him to draw,” Raine added with a fond expression.

“Or dinosaurs!” King exclaimed while throwing his arms up into the air.

Darius wasn’t quite sure what dinosaurs were exactly, but King seemed excited about them. Must be a human thing Luz had told them all about at some point. He smiled nonetheless, chuckling at all they said, “Well, I’ll see what we can manage.”

“I’m just glad he’s going outside finally,” Eda sighed a breath of relief, “Poor kid’s been cooped up in here for weeks, he needs some fresh air and something new to look at.”

Darius looked at the spot where Hunter had been sitting when he was eating, and he noticed Flapjack was no longer present either; she must have followed him out. He smiled at the thought; that little palisman loved him more than anything in this world. It was sweet. Witches were known to become close with their palisman, but what Hunter had with Flapjack was like something Darius had never really seen before. They were practically best friends. She was always looking out for him. They all were.

“You two worry too much,” Darius told them, his expression calmer now, his smile not so tight, “Relax a little. That boy may have pulled the shortest straw in the draw, but he’s smart and he’s strong. He’ll learn how to cope with this healthily, I assure you.”

Raine raised an eyebrow, “Not to burst your bubble, Darius, but has he ever coped with anything healthily?”

Darius had to chuckle at that, “Did he ever have a way to? That should have been your question, Whispers.”

Raine shut their mouth. That was a fair point. They exhaled deeply, closing their eyes briefly, “He trusts you and you know him better than anyone here. I suppose if anyone knows how to talk to him, it would be you.”

“Exactly,” Darius was actually starting to take pride in his social skills with this complicated teenager, “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” He got up suddenly, setting his napkin onto the table and moving to stand behind his chair and push it underneath the table, “I have a morning stroll to attend to.”

And then he shared one last smile with the family and left the kitchen, going to get dressed and find Hunter so they could get going. He had been all talk at the table, but he was still a bit nervous. He hoped this walk would help Hunter open up a little bit more like he did the night previous.

He hoped he at least got the kid to talk about something that interested him. Who knows, he might find it interesting too.

With any luck, this walk would turn out to be a delight.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading!! plz leave a review and tell me what you think, those always brighten my day!! i'll probably post the next chapter on tuesday at the latest!! until then, have a great day/night!! <3

Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

> Darius is able to get Hunter out of the house to go for a walk to the shore, and perhaps on the way Hunter will learn to see things a little clearer.

Chapter Notes

> so sorry for such a long delay of uploads. i was going to upload this yesterday, but there was A LOT going on and then sensory overload decided to be a bitch and :(BUT i'm feeling a bit better today!! this chapter is one of my favorites for these two characters, but i need to add that there is a trigger warning for this one. there is a mention of self-harm here. it's not explicit and is merely mentioned and briefly discussed, nothing graphic, but i feel like i should mention it anyway in case this is an upsetting topic for any readers. that part begins at the paragraph that starts with "Hunter's eyes shone with tears" and ends when Darius says "Okay... that's good." so, if you want to skip it go on ahead!! this is the only chapter that mentions a topic as triggering as this one, after this it gets smoother.
>
> aside from all of that, plz enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darius took longer than he'd meant to getting dressed, which he should've known. He was a perfectionist at heart, and he was intent on looking his best for every occasion, even if that occasion consisted of just taking a short morning walk to the shore. He was able to take more time on his hair than he used to, and as much as he loved the abomination goop for a hairstyle, he much preferred being able to fix up his natural hair. He pulled it up neatly, keeping it off of his shoulders. While the summer was coming to a close, the humidity was not quite done with them yet and he didn't feel like having neck sweat today, thank you.

By the time he was dressed, had his hair the way he wanted, and smelled fresh, Hunter was very impatiently waiting at the door. He actually had enough spirit to say something snappy to him when he approached, "Took you long enough."

Darius actually raised his eyebrows at that, surprised by his sudden confidence. Hunter saw his expression and immediately recoiled, shoulders hunching and arms wrapping tightly around the book he was pressing against his chest; he looked somehow smaller than he already was, "Sorry…"

Darius smiled softly, reaching a hand forward and gently setting it atop Hunter's head. The boy stiffened but didn't recoil, and Darius ruffled his already messy blonde hair; when's the last time he combed through this, he wondered, "It's alright, little one. I quite missed that side of you, if I'm being honest."

Hunter lifted his head to look at him, peering up at him with tired eyes that were rimmed with

almost purple circles and yet something hopeful glinted in them, “Really?”

Darius chuckled, “Well, of course. It’s best when you’re being yourself.”

He lifted his hand from his head then, reaching past him for the door and opening it, gesturing with his other hand for Hunter to go on ahead. And he did, stepping out of the door and outside of the house, asking Darius as he went, “And… The way I’m acting now… That isn’t myself.”

It was more of a statement than a question, and as Darius followed behind him out the door, he tried to reply in the best way he knew how, “Well, I suppose you’re always technically yourself because the way you react to things will be different than the ways other people would react to the same things. But figuratively speaking, the Hunter I know is unashamedly… well… *Hunter.”*

Hunter thinks he knows what he’s trying to say, but he was having a bit of a difficult time wrapping his head around it. He was about to ask Darius further about it, but before he could even get a word out Darius was shutting the door and the familiar shrill voice of the door worm was screeching and bursting their eardrums.

“HOOT! Gooooood morning former bad but still sad boy!” He greeted, and Hunter and Darius alike jumped about a foot in the air at his loud acknowledgement.

“For Titan’s sake— Good morning, Hooty,” Hunter greeted with an underlying tone of irritation in his voice as he rubbed at his ear that had flattened against the side of his head.

Darius had a finger jammed into his own ear, trying to fix the ringing, “Dammit, do you have no volume control?!”

“Nope!” Hooty answered in the same chipper voice, “Your name is Darius!”

“Yes, astute observation, door demon,” He replied sarcastically.

Hooty didn’t seem to catch his sarcasm, so he moved on to asking, “Where are you two headed out on this fine morning?”

“We’re going on a walk to the shore,” Hunter told him, still holding his book to his chest, hiding the cover; whether that be on purpose or just by coincidence, Darius wasn’t sure.

“Ooooh? You’re going outside? Willingly? What was the bribe?” Hooty asked, meaning for the question to be completely innocent despite the antagonistic tone he had taken to say otherwise.

Hunter avoided his gaze, frowning and brushing his words off, “There was no bribe. Darius asked if I wanted to come along, and I accepted the offer. That’s all there was to it.”

“Hmmm,” Hooty narrowed his eyes and slunk closer to Hunter, as if investigating to make sure he was telling the truth. Hunter shrunk back a bit as Hooty scrutinized him, and in the end Hooty’s face went back to how it normally looked and he grinned again, chirping, “Okay! Have fun!”

Hunter released a tense breath, nodding, “Okay, thanks Hooty.”

“Mhm!” And then he went to humming a song he probably made up, leaving Hunter and Darius to go on their way.

They both scurried away as fast as possible, not in the mood to speak to Hooty any longer. Hunter had mostly gotten used to his antics, but he was better able to tolerate him when he wasn’t tired, which just so happened to be never.

The pair walked away from the home, past the bushes and into the trail within the trees. It was a quiet morning, a few birds chirping here and there and other little critters foraging around. The wind blowing through the leaves in the trees made a rather peaceful sound, it was all very relaxing. Darius never quite realized just how pleasant it was out here, he'd been so caught up in his distaste for the Owl Lady's living arrangements and bad habits that he'd never stopped to take in how nice this actually was.

The wind was a bit heavier than usual today, though not heavy enough to be annoying. It did put a little chill in the air he hadn't been expecting though, and he grimaced. The summer surely was coming to a close, the early morning chill of fall starting to set in.

"There's a bit of a nip in the air this morning," Darius observed out loud now, sliding his hands into his pockets to keep them warm. He glanced at Hunter, "Aren't you cold?"

Hunter shrugged and shook his head, "Not really."

That was a lie. Darius could see the pin-prickle on the skin of his arms still clutching his book. Darius didn't push it though, just kept an eye on him. He did try to get a glimpse of the book the boy was holding though, curious about its contents, "What's that book you're holding there? Is it from the human realm?"

Hunter tipped his chin a bit to glance at the hardback book, and then he nodded his answer, "Yes."

He was being awfully quiet all of the sudden; that moment at breakfast must have upset him a great deal. Still, Darius tried to get some more words out of him, "What is it about?"

Hunter remained distant and closed off, not looking up when Darius asked him questions, but he was at least answering them, "Dinosaurs."

"Dinosaurs? I think I heard King mention that at breakfast," He remembered, looking ahead of them to make sure they were still on the right path; they were, "I'm not quite sure I've ever heard much about them. Care to tell me about them?"

Hunter's fingers tightened around the sides of the book, fingernails tapping against the hardcover briefly. He was frowning, a crease between his eyebrows. He looked as if he were thinking something through, coming to a decision. His shoulders were tense, and his voice was small when he did speak again, but he sounded curious and still he avoided even looking at Darius when he asked, "Back at the house… Did you mean what you said? About how I'm acting."

Darius blinked, faltering a bit. He was surprised he'd brought it up, he didn't really think what he had said was all that noteworthy, but apparently he'd been wrong. Hunter had been thinking about it, and it looked as if it bothered him a great deal. Darius answered honestly, "Yes, I did. It's very hard on everyone seeing you in pain, Hunter. When you're being jovial and, well, a smart ass, it's nice to see."

Hunter grimaced as he looked at the space in front of him, continuing to walk ahead, same as Darius. Darius could tell the answer he'd given him was not one he wanted to hear. Darius frowned too, asking, "Is something wrong?"

Hunter's arms somehow wrapped tighter around himself, and he still had yet to lift his gaze to even look at Darius. His eyes scanned the ground for a moment, as if he were searching for his words there, and then he shrugged, "I don't know, I've just been thinking a lot."

Darius knew this wouldn't go down any path that led to a happy revelation, but he pressed on

anyhow. He wanted to know how Hunter was feeling, they all did, and so far Darius had had the most success in getting the boy to talk at all, “Care to elaborate what these thoughts are?”

He was met with more silence. Hunter seemed to do this a lot these days, as if his brain took a moment to process the information it had just taken in, or perhaps he just couldn’t formulate an answer immediately. That was okay though, Darius could be patient.

“Sometimes I… don’t feel like I’m really… *here,”* He answered, nervous about letting that out.

Darius’ eyebrows pulled together to form an expression that looked somewhere between concern and grief, “What do you mean?”

Hunter shrugged, kind of unsure of how to even clarify what he meant, “I-I don’t know, I just feel like… I don’t belong? I guess?”

Darius’ lips pursed into a thin line. He knew Hunter had been feeling out of place, it made sense to. He was in a completely different environment from what he was used to. Granted, he’d been out of the Emperor’s Coven for months and had technically lived with the Noceda family while they were trapped in the human realm, but he hadn’t really been settled there, none of them had. It was a place to stay while they figured out how to get back here, somewhere to stay while they came up with a plan to help everyone in the Boiling Isles. Hunter had never considered it home, not like he was trying to consider where he was staying now as such.

“Everyone is so nice, you know? And they’re trying so hard to help me, and I just feel like I’m not even trying to… get better,” He explained, and Darius stayed silent until he was sure Hunter was done talking, “And besides that, everyone else gets along so well. Luz is happy, the little demon is happy, of course the old lovebirds are happy. Even all of Luz’s friends have gotten back into their old habits and seem happy. But me… I’m just… *Stuck.”*

Darius was quiet for a moment, waiting for Hunter to say something else, and when he didn’t Darius pointed out, “You’re still using that distancing language.”

The teenager blinked, eyebrows furrowing curiously as he turned and lifted his head to look up at Darius, “Distancing language?”

“Yes. By referring to King as *‘the little demon’,* and by calling your friends *‘Luz’s friends’*. Why do you do that?” He already knew the answer, but he wanted Hunter to acknowledge it and explain it with his own words.

He bowed his head to look at his shoes again, a pair of raggedy black shoes he’d gotten from the human realm, a gift from Camila he’d said. Converse is what they were called. He looked ashamed when Darius explained what he’d acknowledged woven into Hunter’s words, but he didn’t deny any of what Darius had said was true. The book was still clutched to his chest, Flapjack was nestled against his shoulder with her eyes closed, stealing a little nap as they walked. She trusted Darius enough to watch over Hunter while she took a break. She was quite the protective little palisman.

Finally, Hunter adjusted his shoulders and tried to talk about the meaning behind his words, “Because I don’t want to overstep my boundaries.”

“And why do you think you’d be doing that by referring to these people by their names and by what they are to you?” He kept pressing him, but he didn’t push too hard. His words were gentle, giving Hunter an exit to the conversation if he so wanted it.

But he kept talking, which Darius was very glad for. This was progress, “Because I’m not a part of the family. I feel like a stranger in the house that I’ve been graciously invited to live in, and I know I should show more that I’m grateful for what they’ve given me, because I am, but… I don’t belong there.”

Darius wouldn’t argue against this point until he heard the whole thing, “And what about *‘Luz’s friends’?”*

Hunter’s fingernails tapped against the back of his book, and he shrunk a bit at the mention of the others. He was frowning deeply, and he mustered up an awkward shrug that made Flapjack readjust in her sleep, “I-I don’t know. They’re always very nice to me but I was in danger and they’re good people, they were probably just helping me because they felt they had to.”

“Okay so, you’re just going to ignore the time they still wanted to talk to you before they knew anything about Belos and the Emperor’s Coven?” Hunter had been so giddy with joy at having people his age to talk to, Darius had felt happy with himself for giving Hunter a scroll to message his new friends back and forth with.

Hunter shook his head though, brushing off their initial kindness rather quickly, already having an answer for it, “Luz told me she already knew something was off about me as soon as she saw me unmasked. It’s fair to assume the others were the same.”

He understood the reasons behind Hunter’s thoughts working the way that they did, but Darius did notice something peculiar about what he was saying. That distancing wording he had used for most people, he didn’t use it for everyone, “Can you explain to me why you stopped calling Luz *‘the human’?”*

Hunter seemed surprised that Darius had noticed that, maybe it was because even he himself hadn’t realized he’d been calling Luz by her name, “W-What?”

“You haven’t been referring to Luz the way you used to. When did that stop? In the human realm?” He asked, genuinely curious but also glad that Hunter at least viewed himself as closer to Luz than he did anyone else.

Hunter’s fingers tapped the back of the book again as he formulated an answer, and when he finally had one, he muttered out, “When she tried to save me…”

Darius was surprised by that, and he raised an eyebrow to show it, “Save you? Did something happen in the human realm? Or when you got back here?”

He shook his head, blonde hair that needed trimming falling nearly into his eyes; he hadn’t run a comb through it in a while it didn’t appear, “Before all of that, before I officially ran away from the Emperor’s Coven. In… In *his* mindscape.”

Oh. Hunter didn’t ever speak about that experience with anyone, they still weren’t one-hundred percent sure of what happened when he and Luz got trapped there, that was knowledge that was kept between the two of them. They of course knew the basics because of what Luz had told Eda, but she had never shared anything outside of her experience. She knew how Hunter felt about it, they had spoken about it before, and perhaps that was why he trusted her above anyone else.

Darius reached out a hand and placed it on Hunter’s shoulder, the one that wasn’t inhabited by Flapjack, stopping the boy from moving ahead any further. Hunter flinched at the sudden contact, but he didn’t move away. He looked up at Darius with maroon eyes full of curiosity, and Darius just had to let him know, “Hunter, you don’t have to talk about this with me. I know what

happened in that man's mindscape was a traumatizing experience, it's alright if you don't want to talk about it."

Hunter's eyes looked so sad and yet when he nodded, he somehow was able to muster up a little smirk and even a joke, "What about my life isn't a traumatizing experience?"

Darius would've chuckled, but Hunter's smile fell quickly, and his shoulders sunk again. His eyes flitted downwards, and he exhaled deeply, anxiously, "Let's just go down to the shore, okay?"

Darius nodded, fingers twitching anxiously against Hunter's shoulder, and he loosened his grasp, "Of course. Come on."

He nudged Hunter in the right direction and onward they went towards the shore. It wasn't a long walk from the house, but it was still what Darius would consider good light exercise. Perfect for a morning stroll, and perhaps even an after dinner one. It was a calming walk too, no loud sounds, just the light rustling of the leaves and branches overhead and the distant howl of wind.

The pathway ended at a hill, a hill Hunter had no problem getting down. He adjusted his stance and crouched a bit to slide down the sandy bank, and once he reached the bottom, he dusted off his pants and ventured onto the shore. Darius followed behind him, grumbling at the white sand that got on his black pants. It was easy to brush off, but it was still irritating. He never was one for dirt and sand and mud and whatever else got things dirty. Ironic that he chose to go into abomination magic, it was sticky and messy, but he knew how to use it well and never got dirty unlike some people within the Owl House. He's seen the photos of Luz coated in abomination goo, such a clumsy child.

Darius smoothed out the wrinkles in his pants and stood closer to the hill they'd just come down, refocusing on what was in front of him and crossing his arms as he searched for the boy who had finally decided to come outside after weeks of holing himself up indoors. He gently set his book down into the sand, peeling off his gloves as well and setting them down on top of the hardback cover. Darius found this interesting. Hunter rarely ever took off those gloves, only before bed and when he was about to interact with water. And that's why Darius mentally smacked himself for taking so long to realize what the boy was about to do.

He watched him trek towards the shoreline, and then get to his knees right before where the water crashed. And then, when a wave crashed gently and water rolled towards him, he submerged his hands within the boiling liquid.

Darius' eyes widened in terror, and he rushed towards Hunter, calling out his name as he did so. Eda and Raine had told him to watch him near the water, they had told him they worry about him when he's near the sea. Darius felt like an idiot for letting it slip his mind, but in his defense, he had trusted Hunter enough to not dunk his hands into boiling hot water.

He slid to his knees behind Hunter, quickly wrapping his arms around his midsection and pulling him away from the water, his hands being yanked out of it as Darius not so gently dragged him backwards, "What are you doing?! Are you mad?!"

Hunter was stiff in his arms, startled by the sudden pressure around his body. Darius could even feel a slight tremble to him. Flapjack had flown off of his shoulder when Darius grabbed him, flying around in circles and tweeting uneasily. Hunter stammered when he spoke next, "I-I'm sorry, I-I was just— I'm sorry, I wanted to show you—"

"Let me see your hands!" Hunter shut his mouth as soon as Darius shouted, and he barely even had time to lift his hands before Darius was grabbing them.

He held him by his wrists, inspecting the flesh that should be bright red from the heat, the flesh that *should* be marred with burns, but instead they looked just as they had before. Crisscrossed scars coating the entirety of both of them, some deeper than others and some just little barely noticeable white lines, but nothing new. No fresh wounds, no red and singed flesh, nothing of the sort. He was perfectly fine.

“I have a tolerance to heat,” Hunter explained, his voice smaller than it had been the entire walk here, wobbling a tad with emotions he was trying so desperately to contain, “I still feel how hot the water is, but it doesn’t hurt me. It’s a Grimwalker thing.”

Darius blinked, looking at Hunter’s hands in his. They were fine. Hunter was fine. Darius’ heart was still hammering in his chest; that had really scared him. His grip didn’t loosen on the kid’s wrists, and he scolded him some more, “You could’ve at least given me a heads up that you were going to do that! I thought you were hurt!”

Hunter winced and shrunk at the yelling, and his voice had become somehow smaller than it already was, “I’m sorry, Darius… It-it won’t happen again.”

Darius knows he shouldn’t have yelled, but he’d just been so scared that Hunter had been hurt… He took a deep breath, calming himself. He wasn’t angry with him, he needed Hunter to know that. He loosened his hold on his wrists, relaxing his own body and releasing a deep breath full of tension, “It’s alright, I’m not upset with you. Just… Don’t scare me like that again, alright?”

Hunter nodded against his shoulder, “O-Okay. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, Hunter. No need for apologies,” He assured him before finally letting him go, letting him scoot away. He didn’t go too far though, just turned around to face him and in front of him, hands on his knees and gaze downcast. Darius’ eyebrows pulled together curiously, “So, was there a reason you wanted to show me this strange little power of yours or did you just want to show off?”

Flapjack flew around in another circle before settling back on Hunter’s shoulder, keeping close to him and rubbing her soft feathers against his cheek to calm him, seeing that he was upset. Hunter took a deep breath and opened his mouth to speak, taking a second to find his words but eventually getting them out, “I found out in his mindscape what I was. I found out I was never a witch, I was just created to serve as some twisted fantasy. I’m a replacement for a man that’s been dead for hundreds of years.”

Hunter had never mentioned this. Everyone knew he was a Grimwalker, and everyone knew he was created to serve as Belos’ right-hand man for a purpose that was never revealed. But perhaps there was never a purpose for him. Maybe he was always just here as some sort of unhealthy and sick and twisted coping mechanism that Belos had for himself. And Hunter had no knowledge of it until recently, and every Grimwalker before him had been just as scared and unsure as he is, only they never got to live to learn how to live with it. They never got to grow and become their own person. Not like Hunter was trying to do now.

“Are you telling me that… you know who Belos tried to mold you after?” He asked him, leaning forward slightly as his curiosity started to get the best of him.

Hunter looked up from the ground briefly to look at him, seeing his intrigued expression, and he just as quickly dropped his gaze back to the sand. He nodded faintly, curling his fingers into the fabric of his pants that rested over his knees, “His name was Caleb Wittebane. He was Belos' brother.”

That was surprising yet at the same time it wasn't. It made sense, but it was such an immensely fucked up concept that it was hard for him to grasp. Darius couldn't even question it further, because Hunter chuckled emotionlessly and ranted on, "I saw his statue in the human realm, in Luz's town. The Wittebane's, they were important people there at one time. He… looked like me."

He sounded put off by it, as if it were something he hated being true. He knew nothing of the man, and yet he hated the fact he was even related to him in the first place. It felt silly, but he felt it anyway.

"Well… He looked like me if I were more human. No pointy ears, less dark circles, less scars, less… *me,"* Darius' eyes became sad at that, and he frowned deeply, and Hunter just chuckled again, the same emotionless sound as before, "I came out here before and found out I could touch the water without it burning me, and I thought… Hey, just one more thing to make me that much different from everyone else. Not a human, not a witch, just… something that never should've been."

Hunter's eyes shone with tears at that last part, and he tried to hide them from him, he did, but Darius saw. He thought over what the kid had said, taking it all in at an easy pace but trying to process it quickly so he could say something back to him. He swallowed the lump in his throat and despite not wanting to, he had to ask. No. He had to *know,* "Hunter, how did you find out you couldn't be burned?"

Again, with the emotionless laughter, though this time he threw in an awkward shrug with only one shoulder, the one that Flapjack wasn't nestled on, "Well, I guess it was always in the back of my mind but with everything that was going on I never thought about it too much, and Belos always told me my armor protected me from the boiling sea so—"

"Hunter," Darius rushed him along, knowing he was stalling.

Hunter frowned and he once again met his eyes briefly. He exhaled and looked at his hands, bare for once, littered in scars given to him by rocks in a mountain wall, and needles, and blades, and a horrible curse that was taken out on him. His breath hitched, and he somehow found it in him to answer through a broken and repressed sob, "I was trying to hurt myself."

Darius inhaled sharply. He knew that, deep down, but hearing it out loud was still hard to handle.

"I-I'm sorry, I just— I always hated my hands and they're always covered up anyway, so I just thought no one would notice or care if I just—"

Darius lurched forward and wrapped his arms around Hunter, hugging him tight and keeping him close. Hunter gasped and froze in fear, never liking sudden touch or touch at all without being asked first, but he slowly relaxed when he realized he wasn't being hurt, only cared for. Tears still burned his eyes, and he continued to fight at them, not wanting to cry in front of Darius again. Darius held him so firmly though, a comforting hand placed against his back and the other finding the back of his head, fingers carefully brushing through the mess of blonde hair. It was all so pacifying; he couldn't help but relax and lean into him.

"I'm sorry, I-I won't do it again," His voice was so weak, barely contained sobs begging to get out, "I just d-didn't know what to do. I thought I deserved it, I thought I—"

"No, Hunter. You don't deserve any kind of pain," Darius shook him where he rested in his arms, fighting at his own tears now, steadying his voice as best as he could at the moment; it was just all so emotional he was having a hard time doing so, "You never have. Understand?"

Hunter was hesitant, but he nodded against Darius' shoulder, sniffling, "Yeah."

Darius held the back of Hunter's head, keeping him firmly against his shoulder as he asked his next question; he needed to know, "Have you hurt yourself since then? Have you ever? Or was that just… a spur of the moment decision?"

Hunter shook his head again, quite vehemently, "No, no. I've never… not on purpose."

Darius had been present when Hunter had panic attacks and meltdowns in the past. He sometimes hit himself on the head or yanked on his hair. Sometimes he pinched his skin harshly, he also remembers him biting into the meat of his hand once, but only once. Those were all accidents, things he didn't mean to let happen, he just lost his grip for a moment. If he was telling the truth now, that meant he had never hurt himself on purpose, and that allowed Darius to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Okay, that's… that's good," Darius nodded, loosening his arms tucked around the boy a little but not too much; he didn't want to let him go right now, "If you ever, and I mean *ever* feel like that please just… come to me or Eda or anyone, okay? We want to help you; you just have to trust us."

Hunter fell further against him, lifting his arms and gripping onto the back of Darius' shirt, holding onto it tight, as if Darius would disappear if he let go, "It's hard…"

He was so close to falling apart, but Darius didn't blame him because so was he, "I know it is, but you're doing great. You came out here with me, and you told me some stuff that's been weighing on you. That wasn't easy, but you trusted me enough to tell me, didn't you?"

Hunter nodded again, "Y-Yeah."

"And that's great, I'm glad," He promised him, feeling Flapjack's feathers brush against his arm as she rubbed her head against Hunter's head in a comforting gesture. Darius closed his eyes briefly and exhaled deeply, squeezing Hunter a little tighter, "Are you okay, little one?"

He felt Hunter's fingernails dig against his back as he grasped his shirt between his fingers, and to his relief he felt him relax in his arms as well, "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm… feeling a little better?"

Darius chuckled, "That's good. That's what happens when you get your troubles off of your chest."

Hunter was silent after that, still in Darius' arms and remaining there to bask in the comfort he was receiving. Darius didn't let him go either, glad to be here for him until he was ready to part. For a while, neither of them said anything, just sat in each other's embrace on this somewhat chilly late summer morning. The sound of the waves gently crashing nearby was soothing, and the feeling of the cool sand beneath them wasn't such a bad thing either. If there was a good place to have a breakdown, this was it.

"Darius?" He finally spoke up after a long silence.

"Hm?" Darius hummed in response, a deep rumble in his chest.

Hunter tightened his grip on his shirt again, building up the courage to ask what he wanted, and when he did his tone was shaky, "Is it wrong to hate someone you never knew?"

Darius smiled sadly, and he shook his head softly, "No, it isn't. Not when that person is a source of pain."

The boy sniffled, shaking his head as if he found this entire thing ridiculous, “Caleb he… he never did anything to me, maybe he was even a good person. It’s not his fault what happened, but every time I think about him, I get *so angry.”*

Darius thread his fingers through the teenager’s hair as his negative emotions spiked yet again, “It’s alright to be angry at him, Hunter. It’s not like he’s around to hold a grudge.”

He chuckled at his own joke, and Hunter didn’t seem totally unamused. In fact, he chose that time to pull away finally, sitting back on his knees and scrubbing at his face to rid it of the few tears that had slipped by. He glanced at Darius, seeing the smile on his face, so he smiled too, “Thanks, Darius. For talking to me.”

Darius smiled bigger, something more genuine than before, happier, “Anything for my favorite brat.”

Hunter chuckled, “Don’t tell Luz that.”

“I think she already knows,” Darius nudged him.

And now Hunter smiled softer, seeming somewhat overjoyed by that. Of course, he had to cover up that feeling by distracting from it as he usually did, “I wouldn’t be so sure about that. She thinks you’re cool, you know?”

“What? And you don’t?” He asked, placing a hand against his heart and feigning offense.

“No, you’re totally lame,” He joked and rolled his eyes.

Darius gasped dramatically, “Lame? Me? I take offense to that, young man. I’ll have you know I was the coolest Coven Head, everyone thought so.”

“Really? Then why was everyone always talking about Raine?” He asked him, smirking smugly, as if he took pride in being a little shit.

“That sneaky bard was always stealing my thunder, even back at Hexide,” Darius rolled his eyes, “I’ll have to prove to them just how much more fabulous I am.”

“It’s not Raine you have to prove it to. Your favorite brat over here is the one calling you out,” Hunter reminded him.

Darius was going to say something back, something just as teasing, but when he looked at the boy again, he was struck silent. He was smiling that goofy gap-toothed grin of his, his eyes no longer holding such a sad emotion, instead he looked lighter, more joyful. His expression was soft, his morning that had started so sour had turned into something sweeter. Darius’ need to be the winner of their little playful argument suddenly melted away. He was just happy to see Hunter smiling for once.

“I’m glad you decided to come along with me this morning, Hunter,” He told him genuinely, his entire body relaxing now that the heavy emotions had died out and had been replaced with these happier ones, “The outdoors does wonders for you.”

Hunter’s smile never fell, “Yeah, maybe you’re right… I guess going to Hexide with the others won’t be so bad.”

That was such a relief to hear. He had been worried Hunter would try to find a way out of going, “It won’t be, you’re going to do great there. I’m sure your friends have missed you and your

rambling. I sure have."

Darius fell back onto his hands, getting more comfortable in the sand. He let his head fall back and he closed his eyes, soaking in the early morning sun before the temperature started to warm. Hunter worried at his bottom lip between his teeth, looking at the book he'd set to the side earlier. His gloves still sat atop it. He adjusted in the sand, reaching for the gloves, but pausing before he grabbed them. He doesn't need them, does he? Not right now, and the sand was soft. Everything out here was soothing. He brushed his gloves aside, pushing them off of the cover of the book and picking it up. He dusted the sand off of it, looking down at the cover. It was white and had an orange and red dinosaur on it, a Tyrannosaurus Rex. It was the first dinosaur he'd been introduced to, apparently it was the most well-known one in the human realm. Gus had been very interested in it; he even had a t-shirt now that had this particular dinosaur plastered on the front of.

Hunter lifted his eyes from the cover of the book and looked back at Darius who looked way more relaxed than he had since they left the house, and then he glanced at Flapjack on his shoulder. Everyone misses his rambles, huh?

"Hey um, did you know that dinosaurs are actually closely related to birds?" Was his opening question, and it piqued Darius' interest enough to crack open one eye.

"Oh? And what is a dinosaur exactly?" He asked, his tone exhibiting genuine curiosity.

"This," Hunter turned the book over to show Darius the picture on the cover, "I know the one in this picture has scales, but this book is outdated, Luz told me she got it when she was very little. Dinosaurs actually most likely had feathers, and their bone structure is similar to that of a bird's."

Darius raised an eyebrow and glanced at the little cardinal on the kid's shoulder. He lifted a hand and pointed a finger between the large and sharp-toothed monster on the front of the book and the little harmless specimen taking up space on Hunter's shoulder as she often did, "So you're telling me that terrifying beast is an ancestor of that little thing?"

Hunter looked at Flapjack, then his eyebrows knit together, and he shook his head, "Well, obviously they're not related to Flapjack. She's a palisman, but the birds in the human realm do look an awful lot like her, and comparing pictures of bird bones and dinosaur fossils, they're strikingly similar."

Darius sat up and crossed his legs, resting his elbow against one of them and propping his chin in his palm, "Go on, I'm intrigued."

Hunter's eyes lit up and he quickly cracked open his book, beginning to ramble away about the shared genes of dinosaurs and birds and showing Darius pictures and graphs along the way. Darius smiled the entire time, paying close attention and asking questions when he could. He was overjoyed by this development. Hunter hadn't been this invested in anything in months, at least not enough to share it with another person, and sharing what he knew about the things he loved was something he loved to do. So, this was nice.

They stayed on the beach so long that morning that Raine had come looking for them, but when they got here, they had just been roped into listening to Hunter lecture on his theories about what had supposedly wiped out the dinosaurs billions of years ago. Eventually, Eda made it down here too and the same thing happened to her, and the cycle continued until Hunter was running a whole class to the entire family on the history of the giant lizards - no - birds.

It was the best day any of them had had in months.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for reading!! plz leave a review and let me know what you think!!
i'll try my best to upload a new chapter either tomorrow or friday, most likely friday.
until then, have a nice day/night!! <3

Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

> Luz returns to the Boiling Isles for the start of the semester and somehow convinces Hunter to join her and Amity for an afternoon ice cream run.

Chapter Notes

> i almost thought i wouldn't be able to post today because we're getting a part of that hurricane and the wind knocked out our power earlier BUT!! we got it back pretty quick!! so, here's a new chapter and omg it's fluff?? me? writing fluff?? it's more likely than you think. anyways, i hope you enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At least he had stopped cleaning.

Well, he still cleaned and did one too many chores, but it wasn't as intense as before. Darius liked to chalk that up to the two talks he'd had with the kid, talks that led to Hunter letting himself fall apart and tell him what was haunting him. Though, it also probably had to do with getting some sleep. He'd gotten at least a solid three nights in a row of sleep, even if was troubled by nightmares, he still found himself able to sleep more than he had before, so that was progress.

Of course, said progress was slow. Despite being a little easier on himself and his smartass personality shining a little more, he was still incredibly on edge. He flinched at any sudden noise or movement, he apologized profusely when he *'messed up',* and he'd had four panic attacks in the past several days. He was still exhausted, and so was everyone else, but today held different possibilities.

Luz was coming back, the start of the semester at Hexide starting up again within the next week or so, and despite Hunter acting like he didn't care, they could all tell he was excited.

"Ooh, ooh! What's this one? It looks like me!" King excitedly pointed to the picture of a big sharp-toothed dino, blue and green in color and looking particularly dangerous.

"That's a Spinosaurus, and you don't look much like this one at all," Hunter deadpanned, causing King to narrow his eyes in irritation and whine, but Hunter quickly turned to another page and pointed to a different sharp-toothed dinosaur only this one had little horns on its head, "You look more like this one."

King's eyes widened in awe, *"Oooh,* what is that one called?"

"A Ceratosaurus," He explained, moving a hand around as he spoke animatedly, "These lived in the Jurassic period."

"And were these meat-eating kinds?" King asked, tapping a claw against the picture.

Hunter nodded in confirmation, “Yeah, they were carnivorous. A lot of bipedal dinosaurs were. Quadrupedal dinosaurs were almost exclusively herbivores, excluding *one.”*

“Which one?” King kicked his legs and leaned closer to Hunter to get a better look at the book.

“The Xuanhanosaurus,” Hunter flipped to the page it was on to show the younger boy, “It looks like it may have walked bipedally, but it’s long arms and the possession of a fourth metacarpal suggests that it may have been a four-legged animal, which is fascinating.”

“Whoa, that’s really awesome,” King’s eyes were wide and shining with amazement, and it made Hunter smile to see the boy as interested in this as he was.

“Yeah, it is pretty cool,” Hunter replied, looking down at the picture of the extinct creature with a fond smile.

“I see you’re still a nerd,” A familiar voice spoke at the entrance of the home, making both the boys lift their heads to look and see none other than Luz Noceda standing in the open doorway.

“Luz!” King beamed, overcome with joy. He hopped up off of the couch and scurried over to the girl, arms open and ready for a hug.

“King! Oh my gosh, I’ve missed you *sooo* much!” He jumped into her arms, and she spun him around, both of them giggling as she did so. She set him down quicker than she used to though, commenting on his height, “Wow, you’ve gotten even taller! Won’t be long before you’re as tall as me!”

King giggled, placing his hands over his mouth and scrunching his shoulders, “And then you shall never be able to stop me!”

“Stop you from what? Being absolutely adorable? Like I’d even try,” She teased, poking him in the side to tickle him and he giggled in response.

Hunter had closed his book as the two were reuniting, setting it down on the coffee table and standing to approach the newcomer. He offered a little smile to the girl, waving somewhat awkwardly in greeting, “Hey Luz.”

Luz smiled big again, arms being thrown out as she approached him, “Hunter! I’ve missed you!”

Hunter’s smile was awkward, and his eyebrows pulled together slightly to form an expression as if he were confused by her words, “R-Really?”

“Obviously,” Luz scoffed, curling her fingers against her palms and then opening them again, making grabby hands, “Hug please!”

His smile became softer, and he relaxed, opening his arms and consenting to a hug. Luz was overjoyed by that, rushing towards him and making a noise that sounded like an excited squeal. She crashed into him and made him stumble a bit, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him tight, and he pretty quickly melted into it. He always thought Luz gave the best hugs.

“You look healthier,” She said against his shoulder, “You’re still boney though.”

She poked him in the ribs gently, but it still made him jump; she giggled. Hunter exhaled through his nose, “I am eating if that’s what you’re trying to ask.”

“Good, that’s good. I’m glad,” He could practically hear her smiling, and it made him feel warm

knowing that she was happy that he was doing somewhat better.

“Yeah, he ate an entire plate of dinner last night!” King jumped in, and Luz pulled away to look down at him as he explained the current situation, but she kept her hands on Hunter’s shoulders, “He’s sleeping better too! He had a nightmare last night though. He cried for an hour.”

“I told you not to tell anyone about that, you snitch,” Hunter grumbled, glaring tiredly at the demon and blushing in shame.

“Still having nightmares, huh?” She didn’t seem surprised, and why would she be? He had nightmares all the time when they were stuck in the human realm, and she’d been there at his side as much as she could; he actually misses it, “If you ever wanna talk about them, I’m here, okay?”

He was grateful for that, truly. He nodded, able to smile a little at her words, “Yeah. Thanks Luz.”

“No problem!” She beamed, wiping away the sadness in her eyes and placing her hands on his face before leaning in and pressing a kiss to his cheek, *“Mwah!”*

“Eugh!” He complained, pushing her away with clumsy hands, “That’s so gross!”

She rolled her eyes and stepped back from him to give him space as he wiped at his cheek where she had smooched him, “I bet you won’t think it’s gross when Willow does it.”

His face turned a deeper shade of red that they had never even seen before, and they both had to hold back laughter at the look on his face. His shoulders had scrunched up tightly and his fists had clenched at his sides nervously, ears twitching and drooping with embarrassment, “W-Why would you— She— Why would she even do something like that?!”

Luz giggled behind her hand, and it sounded a bit mischievous, “Because she likes you.”

Hunter’s face remained red, but his eyes widened at what Luz said, “She-She does?”

“Ooh? Interested now, are we?” She kept on with the teasing, “So you admit you like her too?”

“W-Well, of course I like her! She’s nice and-and strong and—” He stopped talking, face burning horribly. His hands found each other, and his fingers interlocked to fidget, his gaze falling to the floor as he pouted and avoided looking at the others now. He made a whining sound in his throat, anxious and somewhat uncomfortable; he couldn’t find his words.

“Alright, alright. I’m just messing with you,” Luz told him, nudging him on the shoulder gently, “Come on, wanna help me get my stuff upstairs?”

He nodded, trying to calm down, “Yeah, okay.”

“Ooh! I’ll help too! I’ve gotten stronger, give me the heaviest thing you’ve got!” King told her, scrambling over to Luz’s bags at the doorway.

“Okay, okay! Here, you can take this one,” Her voice was bouncy, she was happy to be back. She’d really missed living here.

“I thought I heard your voice,” Came a different voice from the bottom of the steps.

Luz spun around quickly to face her, beaming with an overwhelming sense of joy before her legs carried her over to the woman who had given her refuge the entire time she was here, “Eda!”

She crashed into her arms, and both of them fell into fits of laughter as they embraced tightly. Eda

spun her around in one circle before setting her on her feet, putting a hand on top of her head, “You got taller.”

Luz peered up at her with that sweet smile Eda had missed so much, “Yep! Can you believe I’m almost as tall as Hunter now?”

Eda chuckled and grabbed a strand of Luz’s hair between her fingers, “And you’re growing your hair out.”

“Oh yeah! You like it?” Luz stepped back and flipped her nearly shoulder length hair dramatically, wiggling her eyebrows, “I think Amity is gunna love it.”

“I’m sure she will, kid,” Eda chuckled.

“It suits you well,” Came another voice, and Luz and Eda both turned to see Raine coming over to greet the girl.

“Oh my gosh, Raine!” Luz shouted their name with just as much enthusiasm as she had everyone else’s, rushing over to them and hugging them tightly.

“Whoa! You’re… almost as tall as me too,” Raine commented with a smile as they wrapped their arms around Luz to return her hug.

“That’s not that impressive, shortstack,” Eda jabbed, placing a hand on her hip as she did so.

Raine only rolled their eyes, “We can’t all be giants, darling.”

“Touche,” She narrowed her eyes playfully.

“This is nice and all, but I think King is about to pass out,” Hunter suddenly interjected, making everyone in the room turn their eyes to the little demon trying incredibly hard to hold the suitcase Luz had handed to him, his eyes wide.

“King! You didn’t have to hold it this whole time! You could’ve set it down!” Luz broke away from Raine and rushed over to King, taking the suitcase from him.

As they bickered over how strong he was, Eda noticed the redness to Hunter’s face and frowned in concern, coming over to stand in front of him, “Hey kid, you look a bit flushed. Are you feeling okay?”

She gently tilted his head towards her with a couple of fingers, brushing the hair back from his face and pressing a palm across his forehead to feel for a fever. Hunter’s eyes were wide, and he chuckled nervously, “Haha! Y-Yeah, I’m fine! Never better actually! Luz, let’s take your stuff upstairs!”

He backed up out of Eda’s hold and took a couple of Luz’s bags, heading for the stairs. Luz watched him go and then looked at Eda who still looked concerned; Luz could only smile. She handed King a lighter bag and took another and went to follow Hunter up the stairs, but not before stopping to assure Eda, “He’s fine. Having girl troubles.”

It seemed like it took Eda a second to comprehend what she had said, and then it clicked. She relaxed and smirked, amused, “I see. Well, if he needs any advice send him my way. I like to think I’m pretty good at picking up hotties.”

She winked and shot finger guns towards Raine, who rolled their eyes in response but smiled

something amused. Luz laughed, “Okay, I’ll make sure to pass on the message.”

And then she went to follow the other two up the steps, going to her room that she had missed so much. She loved being back home in the human realm with her mother, she had missed her so much and she was so happy to be with her again, but she had to admit that sometimes she does miss being here every day. But being here during the school year was amazing and she was so excited to be back. The Boiling Isles had become her home as much as the human realm was.

She made it up to her room, finding Hunter and King already in there and setting her bags down. She stepped into the space, spinning around and taking in all in, absolutely in awe. Hunter raised an eyebrow at her curiously, “You act as if you’ve never been in here before.”

When Luz stopped spinning around, she faced him, smiling and chuckling softly, “Sorry, I just missed this place, is all. Some of my best memories were made here.”

“In this room?” Hunter asked, crossing his arms.

“A few of them, yeah,” She explained, then she shrugged her shoulders loosely, “But also just here in the Boiling Isles. I met all of my friends here, had the most fun I’ve ever had in my life here.”

“Almost died here,” Hunter quipped, holding back a scoff.

Luz smiled softly though, shrugging again, “Worth it. If it weren’t for me, no one would have ever known about Belos. I did tackle you into the mindscape after all.”

“Uh, no, I actually stumbled us into the mindscape. That was my fault,” He corrected her.

“Wow, you even wanna win at causing accidents. You never cease to amaze me, Hunter,” Luz told him, setting the small bags she was carrying down and crossing her arms.

Hunter’s arms fell slack at his sides, and he looked down at the creaky floorboards. He reached across his midsection to grab at his opposite arm, squeezing it awkwardly as he tried to find the right words to say, “I’m… glad you ended up here. If I had never met you, I would probably be…”

He stopped talking, as if the revelation of his likely fate hadn’t it been for Luz was too much for him to admit. She frowned then too, dropping the teasing she’d been doing since she got here and taking a step or two closer to him, “Hey, are you okay?”

He squeezed his arm again, forcing an awkward and nervous smile onto his face and still avoiding looking at her, “Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry, it’s just… been hard after everything that happened, you know?”

“Yeah… Yeah, I get that,” She said, still slowly approaching until she was right in front of him, “It was hard on all of us, but… this is all very new for you, huh?”

“What? Having a family?” He forced a chuckle, his shoulders shifting with the force of it, but he was finally able to lift his eyes from the ground and look at Luz, “The only family I had before turned out to not really even be my family and was only using me for some twisted game he kept playing out, so yeah, I’d say having all of this is just a *bit* overwhelming.”

Luz looked taken aback by that, the look in her eyes sad, and Hunter sighed and apologized, “Sorry, I just… I don’t know, this is all very hard to take in. Everyone keeps telling me I’m safe here, and I know I should believe them, but…”

“It’s hard, I know,” Luz understood, she did. Hunter didn’t have the upbringing he deserved to

have. He wasn't showered with love and affection, he was never given anything he wanted, but they were all trying to make up for that and hopefully eventually he'd feel the love he deserved to feel, "But they are telling the truth. You are safe here."

She stepped just a tiny bit closer to him and carefully set her hand on his shoulder; he didn't flinch away from the touch this time, "You're going to get through this just fine. I promise."

He was able to genuinely smile at her then, "Thanks Luz."

"No problem! Anything for my favorite big brother!" She chuckled, gently brushing her knuckles against his arm.

He rolled his eyes, "I'm your only big brother."

"Aww! You're admitting you're my brother! How sweet!" She clasped her hands at her waist and leaned towards him; she was making those puppy-dog eyes at him.

He put his hand on her face and gently shoved her away, making a sound of disgust at her sappiness; a voice from behind them suddenly spoke, "Umm so do you just want me to set out the sleeping bag where it usually went or do you wanna use the new bed?"

They completely forgot King was in the room with them. Luz peered around Hunter at him, and then her eyes shone with awe, "Oh my gosh! I've got a bed now?!"

King giggled as he climbed up onto the mattress on the bed near the window, walking around in circles before lying down, "Well we couldn't just have you sleeping on the floor again for a whole semester."

"You guys are the best!" Luz flopped onto her back next to King, kicking her legs and giggling giddily, and then she sat up and lifted a finger, "This calls for a celebration!"

Hunter passed her a quizzical look, "Does it really?"

She stuck her tongue out at him, "Don't be a party pooper. King, fetch us some apple blood!"

He kicked his legs and hopped off of the bed, "Right away!" And then he ran around Hunter and out the door, but he peeped right back in and said, "But I'm only serving you because you just got back, tomorrow it's back to business as usual."

She mock saluted him, "Of course, Sir King!"

He giggled and then resumed running down the hall to go and get a drink for them all. Luz let her head fall back and she sighed, relaxing against her new bed and letting her legs dangle off of the side of it. It was nice being back, she missed this old room; it was actually pretty cozy.

Hunter remained in the center of the room, standing awkwardly with his fingers fumbling together. Luz heard his foot slide against the floor, a board creaking, and she lifted her head to look across the room at him. He looked like he wanted to make conversation, but he was always very bad at small talk. Luz smiled sweetly at him, suggesting an idea to him, "Hey Hunter, me and Amity are going to get ice cream later. Do you wanna come with?"

His eyes widened a fraction, surprised by her offer, then he was waving his hands back and forth to decline, "No, I wouldn't want to intrude."

Luz rolled her eyes, "We're not going on a date if that's what you're thinking."

“But…” He shrugged tightly as he tried to find the words to say, “Don’t you guys want to spend some time alone together? I mean, you just got back.”

Again, Luz rolled her eyes, “It’s not like I’ve been gone for months on end without seeing you guys, I have been to visit remember? I literally just saw Amity a couple of weeks ago.”

Hunter scrunched his shoulders up awkwardly, “Still.”

Luz sighed through her nose, her expression softening, and she patted the empty spot next to her on the bed, “Come here. It’s Hunter cuddle time.”

He wanted to roll his eyes, but all he could muster up was a little smirk and he awkwardly shuffled over to the bed. He sat next to her, incredibly still until she scooted closer and their knees knocked. He exhaled deeply and let his head fall against her shoulder, tired eyes looking at the plant across the room he’d kept watered while she’s been gone.

“We both would love to have you there,” Luz assured him in a soft sing-song voice now that they were sitting so close, not wanting to startle him.

He worried on his bottom lip for a moment before he stopped himself, remembering Eda telling him to stop doing that after he’d drawn blood a couple of times. He sighed again, “Really? Amity would want me there?”

“Of course, she would,” She almost sounded confused by his sarcastic tone, and she turned her head a bit so she could see his face a little better, “Why wouldn’t she?”

“Me and her don’t exactly have the greatest history,” He grumbled, sounding almost sad about this fact, “I did sort of threaten you to her face that one time.”

Luz chuckled, “Water under the bridge, Hunter. She was barely ever even mad about that.”

“And how do you know?” He asked her accusingly.

“Because we’ve talked about it,” She answered, nudging him on the leg with her knuckles, “She did notice how awkward you were around her when we were trapped in the human realm, and she asked me about it, and I explained it to her.”

“And she told you she wasn’t mad at me?” He raised an eyebrow in curiosity, but he still felt confused.

“Yep. She wants to be your friend,” She said it so casually, as if it were fact.

“Really? Why?” He was always bewildered when someone told him something like this, because he really couldn’t see the appeal these days, but he was trying to get out of that way of thinking; he still struggled with it obviously.

“Because you’re cool, and funny, and really nice to everyone,” She listed off on her fingers.

He scoffed, “Liar. I’m not nice to everyone.”

Luz giggled in response to that, “Okay, well I think we can make an exception for Kikimora.”

She nudged him with her shoulder that time and he chuckled a little in return, and then the room fell silent for a moment. Hunter thought it through, wondering if he should take her up on her offer. He did miss her, and he thinks he’d be a little sad if she left again so soon. He knew she’d be back

before the night was over, but even still. He'd been cooped up inside for so long, everyone has been telling him to get out a little more, that it would be good for him.

He figures this is as good a place to start as any.

"Okay," He said quietly, his voice barely even audible.

"Huh?" Luz apparently hadn't heard him.

"I said okay," His tone was soft, and he lifted his head from her shoulder, looking at her as he confirmed her offer, "I'll go with you."

Her face lit up in a second, and she squealed in delight, clenching her fists in front of her face as her shoulders scrunched up and her legs went kicking, "Yay! I'm so glad! Amity is gunna be so excited to see you!"

She threw her arms out and nearly tackle hugged him, flinging herself at him and wrapping her arms around his neck. He was usually pretty good at sudden affection from Luz, she had been the first person he trusted after Belos. He smiled and laughed at her excitement, awkwardly patting her back; he still wasn't so good at these hug things.

"Well, what do we have here?" A voice from the doorway spoke smoothly, sounding amused and somewhat teasing. Hunter and Luz pulled apart, looking towards the open door and seeing Darius standing just outside of it and smiling happily in on the two teens, "Hunter? Laughing? Do my ears deceive me?"

"Darius!" Luz greeted cheerfully, "I didn't know you were here!"

"Hello Luz," He greeted in return, "I've been staying here for a little over a week now. Just helping out the loving couple with a few things considering the state of the Isles."

"Of course," Luz nodded in understanding, then she glanced at Hunter briefly before smirking and elbowing him gently, "And you're here to look after your baby bird, right?"

Hunter flushed at the nickname, and he glared at the girl as embarrassment burned his face and ears, "Luz!"

Darius chuckled, "Yes, I am. Have to make sure the little one's not causing too much trouble, but he always was a rebellious one."

He said it fondly, but all of this affection was getting a bit too much for one day, so Hunter stood up and waved his hands around, approaching Darius and shooing him away, "Alright, alright! That's enough! Thank you so much for stopping by Darius!"

"Oh, my apologies. Am I not allowed to commend you anymore? You never had much problem with it in the past," He teased.

"That was before! This is now! Get out!" Hunter kept shooing him away, hoping he'd leave.

"Alright, my goodness! Praise from your guardians is bad, but praise from friends is good. Got it," Darius sarcastically understood, and Hunter just shook his head in denial.

"No! No one needs to say anything about me! Thanks! Bye now!" He was this close to shoving Darius, but then Luz piped up.

“Oh, but I bet you wouldn’t mind Willow talking about you,” She wiggled her eyebrows and held her hand half in front of her mouth as she snickered mischievously.

Hunter’s face somehow got redder and before he could even tell Luz to shut up, Darius was raising his eyebrows and asking, “Oh, Willow? Is she your girlfriend? You didn’t tell me about this.”

Oh Titan, this is the worst.

“No! She’s not my-my girlfriend! She’s just— She’s just a friend! That’s all!” He shouted, his face as red as a tomato at this point.

“Just a friend? Hmm, interesting,” Darius thought out loud, stroking his chin.

“Oh my— Would you just get out!” Hunter had his hands on Darius’ chest and was pushing him now, but he wasn’t budging.

“Okay, okay, I’m going!” Darius held up his hands and started to back away, but he smiled slyly before he left, “But if you need any advice, you know where to find me.”

“I won’t need any, but thanks I guess!” He snapped and Darius only chuckled in response before walking down the hall, which gave Hunter the cue to slam the door shut behind him. That was a nightmare. And Luz was still giggling behind him. He spun around to glare at her, pointing an accusing finger her way, “You’re at fault too!”

Luz feigned shock, mouth agape and holding a hand to her chest, *“Moi?* But I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“You were pressing him on,” He practically growled in irritation.

Luz waved a hand around in dismissal, “He was gunna find out eventually. You don’t hide your crush very well.”

He grabbed a pillow that was on the floor nearby, throwing it across the room and hitting her in the face, eliciting a *‘hmph!’* from her as she fell back onto her bed. Hunter huffed.

Luz just got here, and she was already being a pain in the ass.

- - -

“Luz!” Amity called her name excitedly when she saw her finally arrive, and she threw her arms out and flapped them around a bit as Luz beamed with joy when she caught sight of her.

“Amity!” She ran over and picked her up into her arms, spinning her around and eliciting giggles from the both of them. When she finally set her down, she grabbed her face between her hands and kissed her all over her face, “I missed you so much!”

Amity giggled and blushed as Luz kissed her, “We just saw each other a couple of weeks ago silly.”

“Yeah, but now I get to see you almost every day! It’ll be just like old times!” Luz kissed her on the cheek once more before finally pulling away.

Amity’s giggles died down a little, and that’s when she spotted Hunter awkwardly lingering behind her girlfriend. She was surprised to see him, “Hunter? Oh my gosh, it’s so good to see you!”

He lifted his gaze to look at her when she said that, a look of surprise on his face now too,

“Really?”

Amity smiled, “Of course, it is!” She stepped around Luz and her arms acted like they wanted to lift and give him a hug, but she stopped herself; she had never been incredibly affectionate with anyone other than Luz, “What made you decide to come along?”

He jutted a thumb towards Luz, “What do you think?”

Amity snickered, “Figured. Well, I’m glad. I’ve missed seeing you.”

“Oh, well… Th-that’s nice to hear,” He said awkwardly, not really sure what to say to that; he honestly had a hard time believing it.

Amity just smiled at him though, “I’m serious. I’ve missed you, all of us have.”

Hunter was never good at reading other people's emotions, so he always had a hard time distinguishing their true intentions; obviously. But Amity’s expression looked so soft and gentle, reassuring. He thinks she’s being sincere. He smiled back at her, “I’m glad to hear that, really.”

Luz rejoined them then, throwing her arm around Amity’s shoulders and grinning at them both, “Come on, let’s go inside! I think we could all go for some ice cream right about now.”

“Always,” Amity replied with an amused smirk.

Luz looked to Hunter and held out her hand for him to take, “Come on, sad boy. Ice cream is the best medicine.”

“I think medicine is the best medicine,” Hunter said in a deadpan.

Luz rolled her eyes and flicked her fingers impatiently, “Just come on.”

He took her hand and let her lead him inside, listening to her ramble about the ice cream flavors they had to choose from; she always had a hard time coming to a decision. She, of course, couldn’t consume all of the flavors available. Some of them weren’t edible for humans, and funnily enough Hunter had learned that he couldn’t consume a lot of food from the Boiling Isles either. Belos and him had always had meals together, or at least most of the time. They had food Belos specially made, and he recalls having the same sort of things over and over again. He never complained though, why would he? He now understood it was because Belos was a human, and Hunter was… sort of one. He was cloned after one anyway, so close enough, right? He could still consume a few things from the Boiling Isles, a few more things than Luz, but he was mostly on the same diet as she was. He was at least glad for that; it was better not being so alone.

They went inside and got some ice cream, Luz getting the closest thing to human chocolate they had, and Hunter got whatever the pink one was; he forgot the name of it and always referred to it as the pink flavor. And Amity got some deep purple colored ice cream with a weird name, it looked almost the same shade as her abomination magic.

They took a seat at a small table near the window, and Luz immediately dug in, humming with delight as the taste of the sweet treat touched her tongue, “Man, I sure missed this.”

“Boiling Isles ice cream?” Hunter asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No, hanging out with my friends,” She giggled, kicking her legs a little under the table in joy.

“We missed you too,” Amity reached across the table and grasped her girlfriend’s hand, squeezing

gently and smiling.

Luz grinned happily, “Oh man, I’m so excited to get back to Hexide! I can’t wait to see what kind of antics we get up to this year! Especially since we have a new weirdo to tag along.”

She elbowed Hunter in the ribs gently, and he grimaced, “Well, hopefully not the kind of antics we all got into last time we were all together.”

Luz snickered, “Of course not, just regular teenage fun. Ooh, remember that time we all almost got expelled?”

“You almost got expelled, I remained in perfect attendance,” Amity jokes, flipping her long hair over her shoulder for dramatic flair.

Luz poked her in the shoulder teasingly, “Only because your parents were well respected at the time.”

“How did you almost get expelled?” Hunter asked.

“It’s a long story,” She dismisses with a wave of her hand, “It’s in the past though, just a bunch of misunderstandings and wrong place wrong time. We have new possibilities to look forward to now!”

“Yeah! I heard Willow was busy getting things prepared for the Flyer Derby team,” Amity told them.

“Really?” Hunter’s eyes lit up, showing intrigue.

Luz gasped excitedly, “Are you going to join?”

And suddenly he felt nervous for some reason. He wasn’t really sure if that was a good idea, “I don’t know… I wouldn’t want to be a burden.”

“Why would you be a burden?” Amity asked him after swallowing a mouthful of ice cream, a look of confusion pinching her features tight.

He shrugged, a sort of stim he did when he didn’t really know what to say, “I-I don’t know. I just show up in the middle of everyone’s school career and start interjecting myself into everything? Feels wrong.”

“Oh, come on, Hunter, don’t be like that,” Luz nudged him to try and get him to lighten up.

“Yeah, there’s no need to feel that way. I mean, it’s sort of the same thing Luz did, and we all took her in with open arms,” Amity assured him.

“Well, you were a bit of a harder egg to crack,” Luz mumbled, only to get a playful shove from Amity, both of them giggling.

“Stop it, I’m trying to be supportive,” Amity smiled, then she looked at Hunter to reassure him again, “We all want you to be with us and I’m sure Willow would be glad to have you back on the team.”

“I mean, she did ramble on and on about how good you were at it when you played last year,” Luz told him, “The whole team told us about how you helped them win the scrimmage so the team could actually be approved. Without you, there might not even be a team.”

He wasn't used to praise of any kind, but especially not of this nature. He used to be praised if he did well on a mission, or if he did well in combat training, but he'd never been praised for such… normal stuff. Doing well in a sporting event? He remembered the thought he had that day, of wishing that was something he could do more often. It was the first real fun he thinks he ever had. And they all liked him, or at least he had hoped they did. He did text the team after Darius gave him a scroll, and they texted him unprompted sometimes too. So, they must have liked him. Right?

"I don't know…" He still was unsure though.

"Just wait until you see them all at school, alright?" Luz told him, "You'll see that we're all really excited that you get to be there with us."

"Yeah, and me and Luz will be in the bleachers of every Flyer Derby game cheering you on!" Amity said cheerfully.

"We'll be your number one fans!" Luz cheered, "Oh my gosh, and Eda and Raine can come to your games! And Darius too!"

Hunter was feeling flustered by the idea of everyone being so happy just to have him around, and despite the negativity that always ate away at his mind, he couldn't help the hopeful smile that pulled up the corners of his lips, "I guess that would be nice."

"Just you wait, Hunter. This year is gunna be great!" Luz beamed, throwing an arm over his shoulders, and he had to admit to himself that he found it comforting, the pressure on his shoulders and the words.

After the Luz-Amity pep talk, they all fell into lighter conversation. Luz rambled on about what was going on at home, told them about how her mom was doing and how human school was; she claimed it was boring, but Hunter and Amity sure found the things she learned there interesting. Amity told them about her family as well, about her troubles with her mother and how her dad was trying his best but still got on her nerves often. And Hunter didn't have much to say, but Luz did ask him if he was enjoying the book she had brought him last time she came to visit, and that led into him infodumping about every dinosaur fact that came to mind in the moment; neither Luz nor Amity ever told him to stop, they even seemed intrigued.

At the end of the day, they all ended up having a good outing. Hunter was glad he let Luz talk him into going. He missed *them.* Maybe he was more excited for school to start than he realized.

Chapter End Notes

> i hope you liked it and thanks for reading!! next chapter will be posted by the end of the weekend!! leave a review and let me know what you think!! until next time, have a nice day/night!! <3

Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

> Hunter starts his first day at Hexide and it actually goes pretty smoothly... Well, for the most part.

Chapter Notes

> I keep posting these so late so sorry. TW for a panic attack in this one, but it's minor. most of this chapter is fluffy and you get to see some willow and hunter as well as gus and hunter scenes in this one!! hurray!! plz enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He smoothed out his robe for the hundredth time, making sure it was completely free of wrinkles or any dust or hair or even feathers that may be there. He's been scrutinizing himself in the mirror in the bathroom for Titan knows how long, wondering if he was even presentable enough for this. When he was in the Emperor's Coven he took pride in his appearance, always trying to look professional so he could be respected in his profession at such a young age. But this was different. He'd never had to just look like himself, and he wasn't even sure what exactly he was supposed to do to make himself look nice. It's not like he'd exactly had the greatest sense of self-care in recent months, but he'd been working on it with the help of Darius, Luz, and Raine. Eda had been banned from helping him dress himself, she apparently didn't have a great sense of fashion herself. He was just in his school uniform today anyway, his undershirt and leggings the same colors as Luz's. He didn't have to worry too much about dressing to impress.

His hair looked fine though, right? He combed it the same way as usual, but it was getting sort of longer again. The sides of his head where the hair used to be buzzed short was now covered in blonde hair. His hair wasn't long or anything, but certainly longer than before. He had a hard time getting it to lay the way he wanted it to, his hair sort of falling into his eyes these days when it went without care. The cowlick on top of his head had come back, and it was such a pain so that hadn't changed. He hated that damn thing and wanted it gone, but Luz said it was charming, so he left it alone.

Flapjack suddenly chirped from his shoulder, reminding him that she was there. He blinked and snapped out of his thoughts about cutting that irritating long strand of hair from his head and he looked at his palisman looking at him sweetly. He sighed and looked in the mirror again, frowning and shoulders pulled tight, "I don't know, Flapjack… Is this really such a good idea?"

He lifted a gloved hand and pressed his fingers gently to the dark circles under his eyes, darker than they used to be somehow. He thought without the pressure of Belos, without the constant need to be working to prove himself, and time to get much needed rest, that the bags would disappear with time. Turns out having constant nightmares and several panic attacks a week had an effect on his physical appearance as well.

He chuckled sort of sadly, “I don’t look very healthy, huh?”

Flapjack chirped. *Look fine.*

“You’re just saying that to be nice,” Hunter smiled and rolled his eyes, messing with his shirt and straightening it out; he frowned, “I look so… sickly.”

He had thinned out from his poor eating habits. He used to be a little bigger, he had more muscle, and he was a little chubby. Now he was just skin and bone. He wanted to put that weight back on. It was making him uncomfortable how ill he looked.

“Is this a good idea?” Hunter asked the bird on his shoulder, “Should I really be going to school? Maybe teaching myself these things was better, and Luz was always a big help. I’m really good at researching things on my own, maybe I should just—”

Flapjack fluttered up a bit and grabbed his cowlick with her beak, tugging on it gently to stop him from that train of thought, making noises of displeasure with him the entire time. Hunter waved a hand around to make her stop, “Okay, okay! I’m sorry! I’m just nervous! Stop pulling so hard!”

“Well, what is going on in here?” A familiar voice spoke from the doorway, and when Hunter looked in the reflection of the mirror, he saw Eda leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed and an amused smirk on her face.

Hunter shooed Flapjack away until she was perched on his shoulder again, and he turned around to face Eda, “Nothing. Just getting ready.”

“Really? Cuz you’ve been in here for half an hour,” Eda informed him, tilting her head towards the hallway to the left, “Luz is waiting downstairs for you.”

“Right. Sorry,” He apologized, casting his gaze to the ground and bracing his hands on the sink behind him, tapping the ceramic with nervous fingers.

Eda’s amused expression fell just a tad, making way for something a little more concerned, “Hey, what’s buggin you?”

Hunter shrugged, always anxious to admit weakness. But he’s been told it’s okay to talk about what’s bothering him, and Eda was asking him. He pouted and looked at his feet, still tapping his fingers against the sink before working up the nerve to say what he wanted to, “I don’t know if this is a good idea… going to Hexide.”

Flapjack went to pull on his hair again, but he stopped her before she could, leaving her to twitter on irritably on his shoulder. Eda frowned and her crossed arms deflated a little against her midsection, “And why’s that?”

He shrugged again with his left side, “I don’t really fit in with other kids. I mean, look at me.”

He motioned to himself, scoffing and smiling in a way that made him look annoyed with himself. Eda exhaled deeply and let her arms fall from in front of her chest, stepping into the bathroom with Hunter and reaching out a hand to put on his shoulder but pausing before she got there, “May I?”

He nodded and she placed her hand gently against his shoulder, and then she turned him so he was facing the mirror again. He frowned when he locked eyes with himself and quickly averted the contact, frowning deeper than before. Eda had an arm around his shoulders, Flapjack moving to sit near the sink as Eda tried to talk to their boy.

“It’s always hard to see yourself the way other people see you,” She explained to him.

“I look like I’ve had the shit kicked out of me,” Hunter tried to joke, but it just ended up sounding kind of sad.

“No, you’re healing,” Eda told him, strengthening her hold around him a little more, hoping it was comforting, “And healing takes time.”

Hunter was uncomfortable; he shook his head and ridiculed himself, “I barely sleep.”

“But you sleep better than you were just weeks ago,” She reminded him.

“I barely eat,” He tried to tell her, but she wasn’t having that.

“You ate a whole sandwich yesterday at lunch, and you ate half a plate at dinner,” She kept on telling him, but he was determined to find something negative.

“I’m grouchy?” That one was weak.

“So am I,” Eda dismissed with the wave of a hand, “Listen kid, you may think you’re not making any progress, but we all see how hard you’re working and we’re all really proud of you. You’re not where you wanna be yet, and that’s okay, cut yourself some slack. No one is going to judge you for it.”

“They might,” He grumbled, “Some people aren’t very nice, Miss Eda.”

“It’s just Eda,” She reminded him, “And you’re right, so let me rephrase. No one who really actually knows you is going to judge you. Everyone important to you is here for you all the time, so don’t worry too much about what we think and definitely don’t worry about what some losers think. The only person whose opinion matters about you is yours.”

Hunter didn’t really believe that, and his deflated body language showed it, “Then why does it always hurt so much when other people say horrible things?”

Eda was surprised by his words, and he seemed to feel the same. His eyes widened and he looked up at Eda, regretting having said that. He shook his head, “I-I’m sorry, I know what you’re trying to tell me, I’m just—”

“Scared? Alright, I’ll be real with you if that’s what you want,” Eda moved away from him and went to sit on the closed toilet, sighing deeply before continuing, “Ever heard the saying *‘sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me’?* Well, it’s a load of shit.”

He was a bit stunned by that, and despite wanting her to be realistic with him it hurt more than he was expecting it to. He leaned back against the sink again and he stayed silent and listened; Eda continued, “When I was younger and I got cursed, it was hard. People talked, I was called all sorts of names and people were terrified of me because of what happened. I let it all get to my head, even if I pretended it didn’t bother me, and eventually I started believing in everything everyone said and I saw myself as a monster. And… that’s why things didn’t work out with Raine for a while, I was scared of hurting them, of hurting everyone. I had nobody for so long, I shut myself in, all because of something words had made me believe.”

Hunter thought that over for a moment. It made sense. Luz had told him before that Eda had seemed happier when she secluded herself when she first got here, but obviously Eda did have a motherly instinct, and she was a caring person. She was never meant to be alone; she was always destined to be surrounded by the people she loves. And it worked out for her. She seems happy

now. She has Raine back, and she has King and Luz and… Well, she has him. He hopes he makes her happy. She's always smiling when he talks to her, so maybe he does.

"How did you get through it?" He asked softly, so curious and desperate for an answer to this problem he was having.

"Well, it didn't happen overnight," She chuckled, then she caught his eyes and smiled softly, "But, surrounding yourself with people who really truly care about you… That makes it so much easier to love yourself. It's still hard, don't get me wrong, but with the right support system and the love other people give to you, it's not so bad looking in the mirror."

She said this all while getting to her feet again and stepping back over to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and turning him to the mirror again. He looked at himself once more, and this time he didn't try to avert his eyes. He looked worn out and tired, pale and boney, but he wasn't like he was before. He was doing better. He was out of an abusive situation; he was with people who truly cared about him. Maybe, just maybe, this wouldn't be so bad.

"Okay. I think I can do this," He said with a curt nod, exhaling deeply.

Eda smiled and clapped him on the shoulder a few times gently, "Atta boy! Come on then! Your friends are excited to see ya!"

She turned to go and leave him to finish cleaning up, but before she even got to the door, she was turning back around to face him, "Oh, I almost forgot!"

He started to ask what she forgot, but before he could she was wrapping him up again, a hand on his face and pressing a kiss to his cheek. He tried to flail his arms, face flushing, "Ack! Ew gross, get off of me!"

"Alright, alright!" She chuckled, "One more!"

She kissed his face again and it made him have to suppress a chuckle, "Alright, I get it! You like me, now stop it!"

Eda finally let him go, placing her hands on her hips and grinning with pride, "Correction, I love you, and don't forget it! Now hurry up, the clock's a tickin' and you don't wanna be late on your first day!"

And then she was gone and down the stairs, leaving Hunter in the bathroom with his palisman. Flapjack chirped, which in turn made Hunter snap his gaze away from the doorway Eda had just exited through. He turned back around to the little bird, and she tilted her head and chirped curiously. Hunter was smiling happily, his face flushed and a soft look in his eyes. Flapjack hopped forward and nudged his hand with her head, and he looked down at her at the pressure against his fingers.

"Right, I need to get going. Sorry," He lifted a hand to wipe at his eyes, feigning removing an eyelash, but Flapjack saw right through that and tweeted softly, "I'm fine. I guess I just heard something I've been needing to hear."

Flapjack made some happy little sounds and hopped back up onto Hunter's arm, perching herself on his shoulder where she often resided, nuzzling her soft feathers against his neck to offer comfort as Hunter finished getting ready for his first day of school.

- - -

“Oh Titan, I think I’m gunna be sick,” Hunter said as he and Luz approached the school building where other students had gathered before the bell, clutching his palisman staff between his hands as soon as he landed.

“Relax Hunter, you’re going to be fine,” Luz tried to calm him down, “Everybody gets first day of school jitters, especially when you're new.”

“Really? You did?” He asked it as if he were accusing her of lying.

She held her hands defensively, “Of course, I did! I may hide my anxieties better than other people but stepping foot into a whole new land with people I didn’t know was really scary.”

He knows that. This was sort of the same thing. Being a regular kid was foreign territory to him, so in Luz’s words this might just be a whole new land in his book. And he might’ve known some of the people here at least, but it was still so terrifying. He was shaking his head and stumbling back a little, “I don’t know if I can do this, Luz.”

Luz caught him when he tripped over his feet a little, then she grabbed his arms and made him face her, “Hey, look at me. You can do this, okay?”

She looked determined, but he sure didn’t feel it, “No, maybe this is too much for me to handle right now. I’ve barely even interacted with other people since everything that happened, maybe I’m pushing myself too far. I don’t think I can—”

“Hey, listen to me, Hunter,” Luz shook him a little and got him to catch her gaze, “Everything is going to be fine. We’re going to go up there, you’re going to talk to our friends, and then you’re going to go inside and learn everything you’ve ever wanted to. And everything is going to be alright, I promise.”

His heart - or galdorstone? - was beating hard in his chest and he could feel his breath coming in shorter, “But what if I can’t do it? It’s loud.”

He pulled his hands up to somewhat cover his ears, and Luz kept ahold of his arms and kept her voice low and soft, “It can be overwhelming, I know. But we’re all here for you, and if you ever need a break just let one of us know and we’ll help you out, okay?”

Hunter pouted now, huffing, “I feel like such a baby.”

“You’re not a baby, you’re just doing a lot of new things and that’s overwhelming,” Luz said, smiling softly and tilting her head, “You’re not as alone as you think.”

He looked into her eyes, and she looked like she was being genuine, and he knew she was. Luz didn’t lie, never to him. He slowly lowered his hands from hovering around his ears, letting Luz take his hands, “Sorry… I’ll try, I’m just…”

“Nervous? I know, and that’s okay,” She reassured him, “But—”

“You’re right here with me?” He smiled, “Yeah, you’ve mentioned that once or twice.”

Luz giggled, “Well, I just want to make sure you’re getting it. Now come on, I’m sure our friends are very excited to see you.”

Then she pulled him along, their palisman staffs shrinking into their usual size and perching on their respective witch’s shoulders. As they neared the steps at the front of the school, they spotted their friends, Amity, Gus, and Willow. And it appears they spotted them too. Amity got up calmly,

collecting her things, but Willow and Gus beamed with excitement and jumped up, taking off in a sprint towards their friends.

Hunter, knowing they'd run towards them had been expecting them to attack Luz with hugs, those three were always so touchy, but when they reached *him,* he gasped in surprise. Willow wrapped her arms around his waist and picked him up off of his feet, twirling him around with ease.

"Hunter! Oh my Titan, I've missed you!" She giggled as she continued to twirl him. Flapjack had flown off of his shoulder and was chirping excitedly as she flew behind them. Hunter had his hands on Willow's shoulders to steady himself, and she just hugged him so tight and peered up at him, "Where've you been hiding?"

She looked so happy to see him, a big smile plastered on her face and her hold around him firm. His face and ears burned as he squeaked out a greeting, "Hi Willow."

She giggled in response to his flustered greeting, "Hi Hunter."

She set him down carefully and he barely had time to collect himself before Gus was hugging him with the same ferocity as Willow had. He sort of ran in place as he hugged him, excited to see him as everyone else was, "Hunter, we missed you so much! Where have you been?"

"S-Sorry, I've just been… going through some stuff, I guess," He tried to explain with a loose shrug of his shoulders.

Gus let him go and stepped back, frowning in concern as Flapjack came back to land on Hunter's shoulder, "Is everything okay?"

He nodded to ease their worries, "Yeah, I'm fine, don't worry. Just… y'know."

"Oh yeah, I gotcha," Gus patted him on the back and smiled, "But we're here to help, alright?"

"Yeah, no more doing this on your own," Amity said as she approached them, books tucked under her arm and ready for her first class, "We're here for you all the time. Day or night. We're the most annoying friends for a reason."

"Aww, you think I'm annoying?" Luz asked, clasping her hands and batting her eyelashes at her girlfriend as if what Amity had said was flattering to her.

Amity giggled and booped Luz on the nose with a finger, "The most annoying."

Luz's palisman bounced on her shoulder, squeaking happily when the girls laughed. Luz booped the little bat on the nose, "Oh my gosh, it's Oscuro's first day of school too!"

They all smiled at the little bat, and Hunter stroked Flapjack's chest feathers, "Flapjack's too. Guess all three of us are having a day of firsts, huh guys?"

The palisman both made noises of confirmation, and it seemed to be comforting for Hunter and it earned him sweet glances from everyone. And then that's when Gus' name was being called, frantic footsteps following the voice up. The boy looked behind him and his ears twitched in surprise and then they fell when a memory flashed through his head, "Oh dang it, I completely forgot…"

Everyone shared a confused glance as the one calling Gus' name suddenly stumbled to a stop in front of them all, bent over at the middle and hands on his knees as he caught his breath, and then he was lifting his head and glaring at the boy, "Gus! You told me you were going to go over my

speech with me one more time before the assembly!"

Gus smiled sheepishly, holding up his hands in defense of himself as he tried to make up an excuse but, in the end, went with the truth anyway, "I'm sorry, Matt! I completely forgot! Something came up and I—"

"No buts, Porter! You promised me!" He scolded, standing at his full height, which wasn't very tall, and wagging a finger around as if he had some sort of authority over Gus.

"I know, I know! And listen, we still have a few minutes before the bell, so I can still help you," Gus tried to explain to him.

Matt opened his mouth to argue back, but before he could get another word out Hunter was butting in, "Matt? Wait Gus, your boyfriend is Steve's little brother?"

Gus and Matt's faces both turned the deepest shade of red any of them had ever seen, and this is coming from people who had all seen Hunter embarrassed before. Everyone had to hold in giggles, except for Hunter who didn't seem to realize that Gus and Matt weren't *actually* in a relationship. Gus' eyes were wide, and he waved his hands around to dismiss Hunter's curiosity, "N-No! He's-He's not my boyfriend!"

Hunter raised an eyebrow, incredibly confused, "Huh? But in the human realm you told me—"

Gus dashed over to Hunter and slapped both hands over his mouth to shut him up, laughing loudly in an attempt to silence what Hunter had already said, "Haha! Yeah, the human realm sure was crazy, huh?! Haha! Come on, Matt, let's get going so we can look at your speech, okay?"

"Uh-um, y-yeah. Sure," He said it so quietly, face as red as a tomato and arms held stiffly at his sides.

Matt shuffled away a little and Gus went to follow after him, but he whispered to Hunter sharply before he left, *"Dude."*

Hunter shrugged and said something that was muffled by Gus' hands; he looked so confused. Gus just shook his head and pouted, letting Hunter go before he turned and followed after Matt to the steps in front of the school entrance. Hunter watched them leave, eyebrows knit together in bewilderment, "What was all that about?"

Luz patted him on the shoulder supportively, "I don't think Gus has told Matt how he feels yet."

Hunter's eyes widened, cheeks flushing with shame as he realized what he'd just done, "What?! But Gus told me—"

"That Matt was basically his boyfriend? Yeah, he says that to avoid actually having to ask him out," Willow explained, but she sounded amused about the whole thing.

Hunter hid his face in his hands, "Oh man… I just humiliated him."

This first day of school was already going so bad. Luz laughed though, rubbing his back soothingly, "Cut yourself a break. If anything, you're doing what any older brother would do."

Hunter gave Luz a borderline irritated glare as he peered at her between his fingers, and she could only smile at him in response, hands on her hips as if she were proud of him for what he had done; she certainly seemed amused by it. Willow spoke now, "Don't worry, Hunter. You probably gave him the nudge he needed. Titan knows we've all been trying to get him to get on with it for so

long."

Hunter sighed and let his hands fall back to his sides, standing up straighter again but still slouching, "Well, what's the hold up? Don't they both like each other? They should just get on with it already."

"If only it was that easy," Willow patted him on the shoulder and shook her head fondly.

Amity elbowed Luz and in turn Luz elbowed Hunter gently in the ribs as Willow turned away to look at where Gus and Matt were sitting on the steps; Luz wiggled her eyebrows, "And what's *your* hold up?"

She looked between him and Willow until he caught wind of what she was alluding to, and his ears and face burned much like Matt and Gus's had just moments ago. He harshly whispered to her, *"Shut up."*

"Hey Hunter," Willow called for him, turning around to look at him again and smiling her always sweet smile.

He smiled too, something more forced as he tried to ignore the flustered feeling in his gut, "Yes?"

His voice was almost a squeak and he had to clear his throat, but luckily Willow wasn't paying too much attention and just went on with what she was going to say originally, "People are starting to head inside to get seats for the assembly, we should go in so we can get seats near the front!"

"O-Oh, okay. Then we can—"

"Come on, we can sit next to each other," She said, making him blush again and then she was grabbing his hand and dragging him towards the entrance, which made him blush harder.

Luz and Amity both chuckled as Willow dragged him off, and Amity had to ask, "Is he still denying liking her?"

"Oh yeah," Luz said, accompanied by a nod.

"How long do you think it takes before one of them breaks and finally asks the other out?" Amity glanced at Luz to see how she was reacting to this.

She was smiling in amusement thinking about this, "Grom. I'll give them till Grom."

"And who will be the one to break?" She wondered.

"That I do not know," Luz admitted, "They're both so stubborn. But this can't go on forever, not with us constantly over their shoulders about it."

Amity's hand hovered over her mouth as she giggled, "That's true. Come on, we should catch up with them."

She grabbed her girlfriend's hand and dragged her after their friends, making Luz laugh, "Whoa! Slow down, Batata!"

They headed inside, Luz winking at Gus who was still talking to Matt as they passed, making the boy blush and sending her a harsh glare. She was so glad to be back.

- - -

Matt's speech ended up really just being a lengthy introduction to the new Council of Head Witches, aka the Head of The Education Department who was none other than Raine Whispers. They used to teach the young bards of this school, and now they were overseeing the entire Boiling Isles school district; they were always pretty good with kids.

Raine wasn't so good at talking to large crowds though, so their speech was awkward, but they got the job done. After about half an hour, the students were dismissed so they could go and prepare for their first classes, but before a few of them left they went down to see Raine and congratulate them on their new position.

"Raine, that was so good!" Luz beamed with pride and excitement as she rushed up to them.

They were still nervous, reaching a hand up to scratch at the back of their head awkwardly and averting their eyes, "Really? I felt so uncomfortable the entire time."

"Aren't you always?" Gus asked with a smirk on his face and arms crossed, and it made Raine chuckle, and then Gus looked to Matt who looked sheepish as well, "And hey, Matty! You did great up there too!"

Matt's eyes widened with surprise, "Oh, really? It was just a dumb introduction, nothing special."

"And you nailed it!" Gus cheered, "Good job!"

Pink dusted Matt's cheeks and he looked elsewhere as he rubbed at his arm awkwardly, ignoring the burning sensation in his face and also ignoring when his brother suddenly came up behind him and ruffled his hair. Hunter was a bit surprised to see him here, "Steve? What are you doing here?"

The man smiled at him when he caught his eyes, "Oh, hey Hunter! I've been floating around, helping out with the new system. Making the world a better place, one step at a time."

Good-hearted, just like always.

"First day of school, huh?" Steve noticed the blonde's uniform, matching Luz' in all mismatching colors.

"Oh, yeah. I'm learning about all the main tracks," He told him, gesturing loosely to the varying colors in his uniform.

"That's pretty rad, man. I bet you're excited going to school like this with all of your friends," He replied with that charming smile of his, "You know, it's actually kind of weird, you not being my superior anymore and all."

That made something twist in Hunter's guts, something full of shame and guilt, and… grief? It was a feeling he hated feeling, and yet he felt it often. It made him feel guilty, grieving his old life. He'd been battling that feeling, but it had proved difficult to shake.

The bell rung, and Hunter's hands shot to his ears and a gasp escaped his throat. A hand was set on his arm, and he flinched, his eyes snapping open and catching Luz standing in front of him, a concerned yet reassuring look in her eyes, "Hey, it's just the bell."

His eyes flicked between everyone standing in front of him, embarrassment burning his face. He let his hands fall away from his head and he took a few deep and even breaths, "R-Right… Sorry…"

"It's okay," She smiled sweetly, squeezing his arm, "Your first class is with me, come on. We can sit next to each other."

He nodded, a little shaky but ready to get out of this gym, “Yeah, okay…”

They said goodbye to their friends for now and went off to attend their first class, and Hunter tried to ignore all of the concerned looks burning into him as they left. All of this worry for him, all of this kindness and tenderness, it was so hard to get used to and understand. He hated that it almost irritated him. He didn’t like being angry, he used to be angry as the Golden Guard and he didn’t want to be like that again. He didn’t understand these feelings, and no matter what he did and how hard he tried, he couldn’t be rid of them.

He pushed them aside in his mind for now though, deciding to deal with them later, he had a class to focus on. It was a potions class, and he ended up finding it quite entertaining and Luz was happy to see a smile or two perk up the corners of his mouth during the class. For a couple of hours, he was occupied and that ended up sweeping the bad thoughts into the back of his mind. He even had a class without anyone he knew in it, and he got through it unscathed. His third class was with Gus though, and that’s where he ran into trouble.

It was so unexpected. They were halfway through the class, and he’d been so preoccupied all day that he hadn’t really been paying attention to just how overwhelming all of this really was. Being around a bunch of new people, new noises, new sights and smells, it was all so completely overwhelming.

He tried to hide his building anxiety at first, his heart racing and his limbs beginning to shake. He hated how weak his body always felt when these things started. He was already quiet, as he had to be because class was ongoing, but he knew if he had the opportunity to speak, he wouldn’t be able to make himself do it. He wanted to flap his hands, it usually helped a little, exerting his energy into something like stimming, but if he did that now people would definitely notice. So, he shook his leg under the desk, hoping it would help and also hoping that if anyone saw they’d just assume he was hyperactive and needed an outlet.

Unfortunately for him, he didn’t notice that he was breathing heavily, and the sound of his gasps were loud enough for several students to hear, including Gus who was suddenly leaning over and whispering, “Hey Hunter, are you okay?”

Hunter looked over at him, unaware that his eyes were wide with panic. He couldn’t get his voice to work, and one look at his face and Gus already knew what was wrong, “Okay, one second buddy. Mr. Ludbane, we need to be excused.”

The teacher, an older man with a white mustache and pinkish skin looked confused and somewhat disappointed, “Mr. Porter, we’re in the middle of a class, what are you—”

“Sorry, Mr. Ludbane! We’ll make it up to you later!” He stood up, his chair screeching against the floor as it was pushed back, grabbing Hunter’s wrist and pulling him to his feet.

Mr. Ludbane yelled after them as they left, but Gus expertly ignored him and pulled Hunter out of the classroom and down the hall. Hunter wasn’t paying much attention to where they were going, he was too busy making sure his legs that felt like jelly didn’t give out underneath him. Gus was slamming open a door and pulling Hunter inside a room, the door shutting firmly behind them. It was an empty classroom, dark and quiet, and slight relief flooded Hunter at this realization.

“Here, sit down,” Gus instructed him gently, hands on his arms and assisting him in taking a seat on the floor; Hunter stumbled a little but got to the ground without hurting himself, “There you go, buddy.”

Hunter felt a bit safer here, so he wasn’t trying as hard to keep his panic under control, and his

hands started to flap anxiously. Gus gave him room to do that, “Let’s do our breathing routine, okay? You remember how to do it?”

Hunter nodded frantically, pulling his knees close and wrapping his shaking arms around them. Gus smiled softly and lifted a hand, “Good, follow my lead.”

They went through their routine, and Hunter followed well but it took him just a little longer to get control on his breathing than it had in the past. Gus was patient, going through the count as many times as they had to, and Hunter eventually calmed down, at least a little. His breathing wasn’t at a normal level, but it was slow enough for it to not be considered hyperventilating. He kept his legs hugged to his chest and he stared at the floor between him and Gus.

Gus let his hand fall into his lap, and he got more comfortable on the floor in front of his friend, crossing his legs and relaxing his shoulders, “Do you want to talk about what happened?”

Hunter shrugged, opening his mouth to speak but having a hard time getting words to come out; Gus held up a hand, “It’s okay, take your time. You don’t have to force it for me.”

Hunter nodded, understanding that well enough. He took another few deep breaths, closing his eyes and letting himself calm down further. Gus never said anything else to push him, just let him do his thing, and when Hunter was ready, he opened his eyes and spoke, “S-Sorry… Today’s been a lot…”

Gus smiled and exhaled through his nose; he knew this exact feeling, “Oh, you’re feeling overwhelmed.”

Hunter nodded, “Yeah… I-I thought this might be too much for me, but I came today anyway because everyone told me it’d be good for me, but… I don’t know, maybe this was too much too soon.”

“I get that,” Gus told him, “Being the new kid in a big school like this is hard. There’s so many different people and the environment can be hard to process, not to mention how much new information is being flooded into your brain at once. It’s tough. And Titan, is it even tougher when you’re not like the other kids.”

Hunter looked at his face as he spoke those words, curious, “You’re… a prodigy, right?”

Gus nodded in confirmation, “Yep. I was a little kid surrounded by way bigger kids when I first came here, and I was naive and gullible. People used me, and they were mean to me, and being so small in a place so big… it was scary. I got overwhelmed like this too, and this is the classroom I always hid in to deal with emotions like this, except… for a long time, I was alone.”

Hunter’s fingers gripped the fabric over his legs, frowning and thinking over what Gus just said, “But then… you met Willow.”

Gus nodded, his smile growing, “Yeah, I did. Heh, she always knows how to put a smile on someone’s face, no matter the circumstances.”

Hunter hugged his legs a little tighter, a little smile tugging at the corner of his lips at the thought of the captain, “Yeah… she does.”

Gus got a mischievous look on his face at the way Hunter said that and the way his expression changed when he said it, “She sure made you feel like you fit into something that day we all met, didn’t she?”

Hunter's smile never fell, it only grew, and his body continued to relax, "Yeah. That day was really the first time I remember ever having any real fun. I felt so… *normal.* In a weird way, if that makes sense."

Gus chuckled, "Yeah, it does. I feel normal in a weird way too when I'm with you guys. Weirdos fit in together."

"You know, I never wanted to be a weirdo," Hunter shrugged, "I was always trying so hard to be respected by everyone, the last thing I wanted was to be different, but… I am," He snorted, "Obviously. Different from everyone. Grimwalkers aren't exactly a common thing these days, or ever for that matter."

Gus looked at his feet that were tapping gently for a moment, thinking briefly over what to say next, and then he smiled and said, "Well, it might not be the same, but our group is two prodigies, the strongest girl to ever grace these Isles, and a human from another realm, I think we can make room for a Grimwalker in our ranks."

Hunter had to smile at that, feeling a little warm as Gus went on, "Yeah, I think I'd like that."

"Well, that's a relief, cuz we were gunna drag you in whether you liked it or not," Gus wiped a hand across his forehead, feigning wiping away sweat.

Hunter laughed, "Thank Titan then."

They both shared a laugh, and then Gus pulled his hands from the floor and wiped them off on his leggings, "Do you want to go back to class, or just sit here a little longer?"

Hunter took a deep breath and thought about it for a second, and then he was nodding curtly, "I think I can handle finishing my classes today."

"Good!" Gus hopped to his feet with ease, smoothing out his robe and holding out a hand for his friend, "Cuz you still got a class with Willow."

He wiggled his eyebrows as Hunter grabbed his hand, and Hunter's face flushed for about the hundredth time today, "Why do all of you keep making that face when me and Willow are together?"

"Cuz you like her? Duh," Gus rolled his eyes, talking about this like it was obvious, because it was.

"W-Well, she's— She's cool! What is there not to like?!" He was speaking in an octave higher than normal, showing his anxiety about the situation.

Gus pulled him to his feet and laughed, "Dude, you're so crushing on her."

Hunter's face felt so hot, "Like… like you and Matt?"

Gus' face turned a similar shade as Hunter's, but he didn't deny it, "As long as you don't go around telling him, then yes. Like me and Matt."

Hunter sheepishly looked away, releasing Gus' hand and holding his arms awkwardly at his sides. If Gus was trusting him with this, then he supposes… "Maybe… I do… like her, the way that you like Matt."

Gus' eyes shone with wonder and he balled his fists up in front of his face and ran in place,

squealing excitedly, “Oh my gosh, is this the first time you’ve admitted this? Am I the first person you’ve told? Oh wow, I feel so special!” He gasped, “Are we best friends?”

Hunter was so flustered, and he shrugged and tilted his head, “Sure? I thought we’d already established this—”

Gus suddenly hugged him, “Oh, this is awesome!” He jumped away just as suddenly as he’d hugged the older boy, “Oh, sorry! Forgot about the touching thing, I was just so excited!”

Hunter smiled softly, “It’s okay, I-I don’t mind. I… I trust you.”

If he wasn’t mistaken, he could’ve sworn he saw tears form in Gus’s eyes, and then the boy was launching at him again and hugging him. Hunter relaxed pretty quickly in the embrace and returned the hug even if it was in a sort of awkward way. Gus was smiling happily, and he spoke quietly, “I’m proud of you, Hunter.”

Hunter’s breath caught in his throat, and he didn’t know how to reply to that, so he never said anything. So, when he felt tears burn his eyes he relaxed in Gus’ embrace, leaning in a little more, letting his friend know not through words but through actions that he was grateful for him always being here for him.

With the newfound strength his best friend has given him, Hunter figured the rest of this day full of new and scary things might not be that bad.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading, and leave a review and let me know what you think if you'd like!! the next chapter will be uploaded on tuesday!! until then, have a good day/night!! <3

Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

A flyer derby scrimmage goes horribly wrong, and Hunter finds himself in more trouble than he can chew.

Chapter Notes

there's more angst in this one, but the hurt/comfort will be in the next chapter :) ruffles hunter's hair i promise he'll be happy by the end of this fic

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So!” Luz suddenly dropped a tray of food onto the table and plopped into the seat across from Hunter who was already sitting with Gus, “How’s your first week at Hexide been?”

Amity and Willow were right behind her, coming over to take a seat at the table as well. Hunter got over his surprise of Luz’s sudden appearance, and he shrugged, “Aside from the panic attack or two, not so bad. I’m learning a lot.”

“He’s very eager to answer questions,” Gus snickered, “He already knows a lot of the material.”

“Well, you taught yourself a lot while in the Emperor’s Coven, didn’t you?” Amity asked as she took a seat in the spot next to Luz, while Willow walked around and sat down right next to—

“Oh yeah, he told me all about that. He’s so smart I’m almost jealous,” Willow startled him when she sat on the other side of him, leaning on her elbow and smiling at him.

Hunter blinked once and then he raised an eyebrow, smirking a little, “Almost jealous? What’s holding you back?”

“Oh, well that’s easy,” She began, leaning a little closer to him, “I’m still a little bit stronger than you.”

“Oh, you are?” He sounded amused, folding his arms on the table to lean on.

Willow shrugged a shoulder, cocky, “Yeah, but just a little.”

“But still stronger,” He said it more as a fact than phrasing it as a question.

“Oh yeah,” She giggled in response.

Luz, Amity, and Gus all shared a look, amused by what they were watching. Amity cleared her throat to break whatever those two had going at the moment, “So, Willow.”

Hunter and Willow pulled away from where they were maybe a little too close, both of them blushing as they realized how in each other’s space they had been, and Willow blinked a couple of

times, “Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Amity giggled, “I was just going to ask about your Flyer Derby team.”

Willow’s eyes lit up, “Oh! Yeah, we’re actually gunna have a scrimmage this afternoon! You guys are gunna be there, right?”

She looked at the boys on her side of the table, and Gus beamed, a determined look in his eyes, “For sure! I gotta get back out there and show those losers at Glandus what Gus Porter is made of!”

Willow giggled, “Great! And you, Hunter?”

Hunter’s ear twitched. He already knew she wanted him to be there, but a feeling deep in his guts that was always twisting, making him think nobody really wanted him around, kept clawing at him. A part of him had still thought maybe she didn’t want him there, that none of them did, that they’d found a good replacement when he’d been gone. So, his chest felt warm when she asked him personally to come to the scrimmage this afternoon.

“Y-Yeah, of course! I’ll be there!” He said with maybe a little too much excitement, but Willow didn’t seem to mind, only smiling in response.

“Great! I can’t wait to see your sick flying skills back in action,” She teased and giggled, nudging him with her elbow.

She was laughing a lot and smiling too. It made him smile too. His face felt a little warm, but for once he didn’t pay it too much mind. He enjoyed lunch with his friends, and he ate every last bite.

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“Man, it sure does feel good to be back in uniform,” Gus said, twirling around to show off the new and improved Hexide Flyer Derby uniform.

“Wow Gus, look at you!” Luz hollered, “How stylish!”

“I must admit, these uniforms are very cute,” Amity had to agree with her girlfriend.

“Thanks, you guys,” Willow was happy with the results as well, “Skara’s the one who designed them.”

The girl placed her hands on her hips, chin up with pride, “Thank you, thank you. Oh please, hold your applause, you guys really flatter me.”

“And I’m back better than ever too, thanks for noticing guys,” Viney joked as she butted into the conversation as well.

Willow leaped at her, giving her a side-hug, “Of course, we noticed you, Viney! Happy to have you back!”

The girls laughed, holding onto each other snuggly, and Luz was the one to speak next, “And here he is! The boy of all time!”

Hunter finally joined their group, Flapjack flying around in a circle above his head and making happy little sounds. He was breathing heavily, and he stumbled forward, hands on his knees and apologizing, “Sorry I’m late! I had to go see Principal Bump.”

Amity frowned, “Oh? Is everything okay?”

He nodded, swiping his hand downwards and catching his breath, “Yeah, it was just a check-in to see how my first week went.”

Gus beamed when he turned away from his other friends, still joking around, throwing his arms up, “Whoa man, you look awesome!”

Hunter finally stood at his full height, looking down at himself a bit nervously, “Really?”

“Yeah! You look sick!” He was very excited, but he often was.

“Sick? But I—”

“Oh wow, Hunter! Looking good!” Viney complimented when she finally pulled away from Willow to greet their other teammate.

“So glad to see everyone pulling off my uniforms so nicely,” Skara crossed her arms, a proud expression curling her lip.

Willow didn’t say anything at first, just looking him over as Hunter shrugged, smiling sheepishly, “It’s just a uniform.”

Willow smiled then, something sweeter than everyone else was wearing, “I always thought you looked nice in a uniform.”

Hunter’s face turned pink, and his ears twitched, and he reached a hand up to scratch at one to distract away from their movement, but in the end he probably just ended up drawing more attention to them. Willow blushed too, fists clenching and unclenching at her sides as Hunter looked at the ground and tugged on his ear.

Gus cleared his throat, *“Anyway,* I think we should stretch so we can start the scrimmage.”

“Yep, sounds like a good idea,” Skara agreed.

“I don’t know, this is kind of entertaining,” Viney twirled a loose strand of hair around her finger.

Skara elbowed her and glared, and Viney rolled her eyes; Willow spoke up, “Yeah, stretching. Sounds good.”

Gus elbowed Hunter in the ribs, and he flinched out of his stupor, “Huh? Oh, yeah. Stretching. Good for the muscles. We wouldn’t want to uh, get injured.”

Oh Titan, this was so awkward.

Gus rolled his eyes and gestured for his friend to follow him; Amity and Luz covered their mouths to stifle giggles, and Gus just glared at them as they passed. Amity and Luz stayed down on the field for the time being, keeping conversation with their friends as they stretched; they’d vacate to the bleachers when the scrimmage actually began. Willow stayed with Skara and Viney, and Amity and Luz chatted their ears off, while Gus stayed back with Hunter who had his eyes on Willow the whole time.

Gus looked between his friends for a moment, sitting on the ground with one leg pushed out in front of him, stretching his body over to touch his toes with his fingers, and as he leaned forward, he whispered, “Psst! Hunter!”

Hunter flinched and his ears raised a bit as he turned his gaze away from Willow and looked at

Gus, “What?”

“You’re making it obvious, man,” Gus told him.

Hunter furrowed his eyebrows in confusion, “Making what obvious?”

Gus had to resist the urge to roll his eyes, “Your crush on Willow.”

And just like that Hunter’s ears folded again, pressing against the sides of his head and pink dusting his cheeks, “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Gus did roll his eyes this time, “Dude, you can’t stop looking at her.”

“Oh,” Hunter replied, frowning.

Gus chuckled, “You gotta be smoother.”

“Smoother,” Hunter repeated, looking over at Gus with a curious expression, “What does that mean?”

“Y’know, you just gotta be… less blatant,” He tried to explain.

“Oh, well how do I do that?” He asked, looking incredibly curious.

“Well, I guess you just…” Gus thought about it for a moment, but when he looked at Hunter and saw the look on his face, he thought maybe he didn’t even really need this advice. He smiled softly, “You know what? Nevermind.”

Hunter raised an eyebrow, “What?”

Gus sat up and waved a hand around to dismiss the thought all together, “I jumped the gun a bit, I actually think you’re doing just fine.”

“Really?” Hunter looked a little relieved at Gus’ words, and he glanced at Willow briefly, “You think so?”

Somehow, Gus’ expression became softer, “Yeah man, Willow likes you. Just be yourself.”

Hunter feels like he’s been spending an awful lot of time blushing lately, “She likes me? Like she… likes me likes me? Or she *likes* me?”

Gus laughed, “Both? I don’t know, you’re cool. Whatever you’re doing now is working.”

“It is?” Hunter looked at Willow again, and this time she caught his eyes and smiled at him, wiggling her fingers in a wave; he smiled and waved back, “Okay. I’ll keep… being myself, I guess.”

Gus’ smile never fell, “Good.”

Gus went to stretch his other leg out in front of him, and before he even was able to, their opponents for the scrimmage showed up, “So, you’re this school’s Flyer Derby team?”

The voice got everyone’s attention, and when they looked up at the newcomers they saw a lanky boy with dark hair, his arms crossed over his chest as he smugly smiled down at all of them, his teammates standing around him not looking as… smarmy as him.

Gus' eyebrows pulled together curiously, "Who are you?"

"Jax," Amity said, recognizing the boy and approaching him; she stood in front of her friends, as if protecting them from the other teenager, "He's Boscha's cousin."

"Oh, well, nice to meet you, Jax," Willow greeted kindly as she got to her feet, smiling and sticking out her hand for him to shake.

"Pleasure," He smiled, only to frown when Willow grabbed his hand and shook it with overwhelming strength. When she was finished, he yanked his hand away and held it to his chest as if she had burned him, "What beastly strength! How horrifying!"

Willow frowned and raised an eyebrow, "Excuse me?"

"What are you doing here, Jax?" Amity snapped, crossing her arms; she seemed incredibly unamused.

He shook his hand out and smiled again, that smug little grin again, "I transferred here, didn't you know? Quite the… school you've got here. Not up to my usual standards, but it'll do I suppose."

Amity rolled her eyes, "I guess it sucks when your mom is exposed for committing political fraud. What did she do again? Use a charm against her higher ups to give her a better position?"

Jax's face turned red with anger, and he stomped forward, grabbing a fist full of Amity's shirt and yanking her forward, "Watch what you say about my mother!"

"Hey, back off!" Luz shouted, stomping forward and putting a hand on his chest to push him away from her girlfriend.

Everyone else had jumped up when he grabbed her, but he released her and backed up away from Luz's hand, giving her an odd look, "Oh, and you're the human of legend. Not as threatening a figure as I would've expected."

"What were you expecting? Sharp teeth and an eight-foot form?" Luz said sarcastically, still glaring sharply at the boy.

"Excuse me for not being knowledgeable on humans," He defended himself.

"Makes sense, you don't seem knowledgeable about a lot of things," Viney crossed her arms and butted into the conversation, "Not a lot going on up there, is there?"

Jax curled his lip in disgust, "You Hexide students have no manners, do you?"

"Look who's talking," Amity retorted.

Jax rolled his eyes and ignored her, "Who's the Captain of this team?"

"Only the strongest person in the Boiling Isles," Gus said, stepping forward to stand next to Willow, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, "Willow Park."

"Willow Park?" Jax repeated her name, then he snickered, "You don't mean the girl who practically flunked out of the Abominations track?"

"Hey! She didn't flunk out; it just wasn't her strong point!" Gus snapped, pointing a finger harshly towards Jax's chest.

“Gus, it’s alright,” Willow assured him; she didn’t let bullies get to her anymore, she knew who she was better than anyone, and she wasn’t about to let some random guy she just met tell her who she is, “Listen Jax, we’re here for a friendly scrimmage. It’s nothing to talk trash over. Let’s just go out there and have fun, okay?”

He scoffed, “Sure. And I’ll go out there and kick your butt and show all these cretins who really deserves to be captain around here.”

“Watch your mouth, buddy,” Gus snapped, holding out his hand and allowing Emmiline to transform into her staff form.

“Wow, how intimidating,” Jax mocked, “A little kid threatening me.”

“Leave it, Gus. He’s not bothering me,” Willow tried to reassure her friend, and Gus glared at Jax, but he didn’t make any move to advance on him.

“Well, we’ll just see about that when I take your spot as captain, now won’t we?” He smirked, tucking his dark hair behind his ear.

Hunter had been staying quiet the whole time, letting his friends deal with it. They were strong, and Willow had said she wasn’t bothered. She was strong too, he knew that, and she wouldn’t let some nobody show up and throw her off like that. It was also his first week here and he didn’t want to get on anybody’s bad side, but when Willow glared at Jax he knew she was at least a little put off by him, so he stepped forward to defend her alongside Gus.

“You’re not taking her spot as captain,” He narrowed his eyes, frowning deeply.

“Oh? And who might you be?” He asked, still talking in that snobbish annoying voice of his.

“I—”

“The guy who’s gunna kick your butt!” Gus hopped forward to stand closer to Hunter, reaching up and placing a hand on his shoulder, “He’s our best flier. By the end of this match, you’ll be running home crying to your fraudulent mother!”

Jax went to spring at Gus, but Willow stepped in front of both of him and Hunter, “Enough. Let’s just play, alright?”

“Fine,” Hunter spat out as he glared at Jax.

“Fine,” Jax said in a slightly more sing-song voice, “Let the best captain win.”

He held out his hand for Willow to shake, and she went to grab ahold of it but before she could Jax was pulling it away and tucking it behind his head, “See you out there, Willow Park.”

And then he turned away and walked off with his teammates; Gus made a face, “That was… kind of lame.”

Luz snickered, “Yeah, a little.”

Willow turned to her boys, scolding but looking flattered all the same, “Alright, listen you two, I appreciate you guys sticking up for me, but you really don’t have to. I can take care of myself, and that guy is definitely not worth your time and energy or mine.”

“But he was calling you a bad captain!” Hunter tried, swinging an arm out and looking disgusted

that anyone would even insinuate such a thing about her.

Willow smiled softly and eased his worry, “Well, that’s his opinion. I know that I’m a good captain and so do you guys. Just ignore him.”

Both of the boys pouted, but they did both mutter out an, “Okay…”

Willow smiled bigger, “Good! Now come on, let’s go show him what we’ve got!”

They all mustered up a cheer and went to the field following Willow, and Luz and Amity went for the bleachers and took their seats to watch their friends play. They were excited, they haven’t gotten to watch them play yet, not after everything that had happened of course. But now things were getting back to normal, and finally they could get back to having fun together.

Everyone took their spots on the field, their palisman at the ready, and when Willow yelled to begin, they took off flying. Jax’s team was fast, and it was obvious they were trying to show off what they had to impress Willow in hopes of her adding them to the team. Jax was going for something more though, he made it clear he wanted to take her place. That wouldn’t be happening though, and she was confident in that.

So, while Jax’s team was fast, Willow’s was faster. Gus had always been a fast flier, and it was obvious the other team was impressed when he stood on his palisman instead of sitting like everyone else. He performed a lot of neat tricks, and he was incredibly agile, so when he grabbed a flag from an opponent’s hand with so much grace the other person had barely even noticed, their expressions understandably formed in awe. Gus easily got a point, pumping his fist as he swung around to rejoin his friends on the field.

Skara was quick too, but more than that she was smart and strategic. She could see any move her opponent threw at her before it even happened, and she avoided it. She was good at dodging other players coming for her, and she was swift when she passed on the flag in her hand to Viney.

Viney wasn’t fast like Gus and Skara, but what she lacked in speed she made up for in brute strength and dedication to her current goal. Their opponent played dirty, they flew in quick and tried to startle them, and with any other team it would’ve worked, but not with this one. Viney flipped upside down on her palisman when she was charged, dropping off of it to fall under her opponent and her staff flying over. Viney directed her body so that she fell at an angle, and once they were passed the other player her paliman flew down and caught her, speeding her towards the goalpost so she could tie off her flag.

This went on for a while, and they scored back and forth, but the established team of the Emerald Entrails kept a bit of a lead the whole scrimmage. Gus passed a flag to Hunter, and the blonde quickly sped ahead, faster than the average witch’s eye could even keep track of. He flew straight up and over the other teams players, then he fell sideways off of his staff and then was caught by Flapjack and zoomed ahead. The other team seemed impressed by his speed, and a few of them even made some positive comments about it to him. It put a smile on his face by the time he got to Willow and passed her the flag in his hands, and she was quick to take off.

Willow was by far the best player on the team, and anyone could tell you that. She was a powerhouse. She was strong, fast, and smart. She knew the ins and outs of this game, and she was showing it. The game at this point had come down to the last point for the Entrails, if they scored here, they’d win the whole match. She took off as fast as she could, easily flying around her opponents as her teammates cheered her on. It wouldn’t take her long to get to the goal post, she took pride in how fast she flew and how dedicated she was to this game.

She could hear her friends cheering her on, Luz and Amity from the bleachers had stood up and were hooting and hollering with joy for her as she zoomed towards the goal post. Viney and Skara were shouting for her to *'Go, go, go!'* and Gus was pumping a fist in the air and cheering. She heard Hunter yell her name, cheering for her to seal the deal. She grinned with pride and leaned forward, trying to go faster as she passed her teammates. Her opponent and apparent rival Jax wasn't having it though. He came out here to win, and he wasn't doing that right now.

He needed to distract her, so as he zoomed after her he could see her teammates off to the sides and scattered around cheering her on. All he needed was a distraction. He leaned to his left, flying towards one of the Entrails, and when they were too focused on their precious captain, Jax swept in from the side and rammed his shoulder into one of his opponents and Willow's friends.

Hunter felt the shoulder collide with his chest and for a moment he lost his breath. He scrambled for his palisman staff but couldn't grab it in time, so when he fell over, he went falling to the ground several dozen feet below. He yelled out and his teammates shouted his name, and it obviously caught Willow's attention.

She stopped in her tracks and turned to the side, looking to see what had happened only to see her friend falling towards the ground and Flapjack soaring after him. In Willow's mind flashed a memory from before the human realm, before reaching Luz at the Emperor's Palace, of a battle on an airship where Hunter went toppling over the side after being hit by a coven scout. Willow had caught him in the end, but that fear that had gripped her when he'd first gone overboard had been very real in the moment, just like it was so real now.

"Hunter!" She called, spinning around and diving down. She knew she wouldn't reach him in time, not personally, so she drew a circle in the air with her finger, casting a spell.

Vines sprouted from the ground, shooting towards the falling boy and quickly and safely wrapping around him to stop him from falling. One grabbed his arm, the other wrapped around his midsection, and the one that held a lot of his weight was wrapped around his ankle which left him dangling upside down. She caught him just a few feet before he hit the ground, and she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw he was safe.

She flew to the ground along with everyone else on her team, and when their feet hit the ground, they ran towards the dangling teenager; Willow was first to call out for him, "Hunter! Are you okay?"

She stopped when she got in front of him, face to face with him even if he was upside down. He was out of breath, the stress and anxiety of falling from such a height obviously winding him, but he did answer her, "Y-Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry you weren't able to score."

Willow couldn't help but laugh, mostly in relief, "Are you kidding me? I'm just glad you're okay."

He smiled back at her, feeling calmer than before even if his breath was still a bit too fast from panic. Willow stepped back a little and lifted her hands, "Here, let's get you out of there."

She moved the vines with a spell and gently flipped him upright and set him on his feet, pulling the vines away and freeing him. He plucked a thorn or two out of his uniform and smoothed out his clothes before smiling at Willow again, and before he knew it his other friends were joining them, Gus speaking first, "Hunter, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, just a little fall that's all," He shrugged; he'd been through way worse.

"Still. That was quite the tumble, my guy," Viney told him.

“Yeah, you really had us worried for a minute there,” Skara said, leaning on her palisman.

Amity suddenly stumbled through, pushing between Willow and Viney gently yet with urgency, “Hey, are you alright?”

Hunter opened his mouth to answer her and let her know he was completely fine, but Luz suddenly broke through everyone and pushed past her girlfriend, rushing forward and wrapping Hunter up in a bone crushing hug, “Oh my gosh, you’re okay! You scared the crap out of me back there!”

“Sorry,” He apologized as she pulled away, “I’m fine though. I promise.”

Luz frowned, pulling away to look at his face and he did look fine, “Are you sure?”

He chuckled and nodded, “Yes Luz, I’m fine.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jax said as he landed behind Luz and the Flyer Derby team, tucking his arms behind his back, his palisman going with them, “You took quite the tumble back there.”

“What the hell is your problem?!” Skara shouted, turning and stepping around her teammates to march towards Jax.

Jax feigned a look of innocence, “My problem? Whatever do you mean? I was checking on my opponent, it’s only good sportsmanship.”

“Good sportsmanship my ass! You pushed him!” She continued to yell, throwing her hands around as she did so.

“I wasn’t expecting him to fall, it was just a little shove. We’re allowed to do so during the game,” He told her, still acting as if he’d done nothing wrong.

“Only if he had a flag, which he didn’t,” Viney stepped in now, her grip around her palisman staff tightening, “What you did was totally uncalled for.”

“You’re all making too big a fuss out of this, all because your poor Captain here didn’t get the winning point,” He was speaking in a sickly smug tone of voice, and it was grating on all of their nerves.

“That’s not the point!” Viney snapped, swiping a hand around.

“Yeah, you were horrible back there!” Gus defended his team.

“Oh please, he’s fine. If you’re going to get so upset about this, maybe you should accept members of the team that aren’t clumsy,” He brushed off their concerns, and now Willow wasn’t having it.

“He could’ve been seriously hurt!” She took a big step forward, and it made Jax take a step back, “We were at least thirty feet up, if he landed wrong or if I hadn’t have caught him something really bad might’ve happened!”

“Well maybe, Captain, you should teach your team how to fall correctly,” Jax spat out.

Willow clenched her fists, “You’re such a…”

“A what?” He rolled his eyes, “Come on, I don’t have all day.”

Willow narrowed her eyes, “A bully.”

Jax laughed, “That’s all? My, you Hexide students sure are sensitive.”

“I should’ve known from the start you were a bad egg,” Willow scoffed, “I should’ve never let you play.”

“Have experience with those who are better than you, Captain?” Jax asked with a raised eyebrow, looking her over, as if judging her, “Makes sense with an attitude and face like that.”

Willow faltered, not expecting such a low blow, and Jax spun around to walk away, expecting the praise of his teammates but not one of them made a peep. Hunter, who had been silent the entire time, recovering from his scary fall, had had enough. He stormed past all of his friends, even Willow, and he yelled for Jax, “Hey, come back here! Don’t run away after running your mouth, you coward!”

Jax stopped, faltered. They all saw him flinch at the insult thrown his way, and when he spun around to look at Hunter there was a new and angrier spark in his dark eyes, “What did you just call me?”

“You heard me,” Hunter replied, “You shouldn’t be accusing others of being lesser than you when all you’re good at is running away.”

Jax scoffed, a smirk on his face but his eyes full of rage, “That’s quite the accusation.”

“Well, you’re proving me right, aren’t you?” He snapped right back.

Jax approached him again, stopping just in front of him and glaring up at him. Hunter was a good couple of inches taller, but Jax had a way of making everyone around him feel small, “Look who’s talking.”

Hunter’s eyebrows furrowed a bit, confused, “What are you talking about?”

Jax tilted his head, jabbing a finger against Hunter’s chest, “Let’s just say someone who’s pretty good at running away shouldn’t be belittling others for doing the same, *Golden Guard.”*

Hunter’s breath caught in his throat and his glare disappeared in an instant, anxiety and fear and guilt and a hundred other negative emotions twisting his gut and clawing at his chest. There was a cacophony of ridicule against Jax that was coming from his friends, and he distinctly saw Gus out of the corner of his eye step past him and shout, “Hey, that’s completely different and you know it!”

“Do I?” Jax shrugged, looking between the Captain whose place on the team he wanted so badly and the boy spiraling out of control standing just next to her, “A girl and boy who can’t stand up to those who make them feel weak. A match made in hell, I’d say.”

He began to chuckle, a smarmy little sound that got underneath everyone’s skin. Everyone was festering with rage, but none of them knew what to say back, or maybe they just didn’t find the words in time. Hunter was upset, hurt and feeling shame burning his insides, but underneath all of that was an anger that kept on building, and when Jax began to laugh after everything he’d just said, Hunter just snapped.

No one was expecting it, least of all Jax who only ever fought with his words. So, when Hunter pulled his arm back and launched it forward quicker than anyone had ever seen and punched Jax right in the face everyone gasped and went silent. Jax yelped out in pain as blood quickly began gushing from his nose, and he fell back onto the grass, cupping his bleeding face and looking up at Hunter with eyes full of shock and maybe even a little bit of fear.

“What the *hell?!”* Jax screeched in a high-pitched tone.

Hunter didn’t say anything, his voice making the decision on its own not to work at the moment, but he had that look in his eye. It was a look only Luz and Amity had ever seen on his face, a sort of manic frenzy, pupils dilated and eyes wide, the corners of his mouth twitching. Amity perhaps saw it best when they were at Eclipse Lake, when he’d been digging his own grave as the fear of disappointing Belos ate away at him, a fear she now understood better than she did back then. Only then he was laughing, but right now he was deathly silent.

“Hunter?” She spoke his name, reaching out a hand towards him but never touching him.

His ear twitched at his name being spoken, and when he looked at all of his friends he was pulled forcibly back into reality. Luz, Amity, Viney, and Skara all had a look of shock on their face, and Gus looked outright concerned. The other team was taken aback by his action, looking horrified that he'd hit their teammate with enough force to break his nose in one blow. And Willow, he couldn’t quite place her expression. She had her hands in front of her mouth, as if she had gasped and had yet to drop her arms again. Her eyes were full of many things, but the one thing that stood out to Hunter the most was horror.

He’d upset his friends.

Panic seized his chest and suddenly it was hard to breathe. He wanted to run; he didn’t want to have to look at any of them anymore. He wanted to be alone, go home, go to his room and just stay there until it felt safe to come out. But he couldn’t leave right now, because now he’s pretty sure he’s in big trouble.

“Hunter Clawthorne!” He flinched at the sound of his name, a name he had yet to be used to. He slowly turned towards the person calling his name, his arms held stiffly at his sides and fists clenched with anxiety, one of them pulsing with pain; and there was Principal Bump, “I’d like to see you in my office. *Now.”*

He obeyed the command, and he bowed his head, avoiding all of the looks his friends were giving him as he passed. At that moment, he felt so alone.

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He sat outside the principal’s office with his head bowed with guilt. All three of his guardians had come to the school after what had happened, and while they all had gone to check on him and make sure he was fine when they got here, he was sent out of the office so Principal Bump could speak with them privately, and it was making his stomach hurt. He was going to be in so much trouble. Maybe this was the straw that broke the camel’s back - so the saying in the human realm goes - maybe this would be what made them all realize he was just a little too much to deal with. He understood, but it still hurt so bad. And now Luz and Gus and Willow and every one of his friends probably saw him for what he was: a soldier, some monster that should’ve never been.

And he was just starting to like it around here…

The door opened to his left and he gasped and lifted his head so quickly anyone would’ve winced at the sight of it. Eda, Raine, and Darius filed out of the room ahead of Principal Bump who glanced at the boy on the bench briefly before muttering something to the three adults and then turning to go back into his office.

When the three looked at him, Hunter quickly bowed his head to avoid looking at any of their disappointed faces. He clasped his hands between his knees, one of his legs bouncing; Darius was

the one who spoke first, “Hunter, are you okay?”

Hunter didn’t say anything in return, just shrugged. There was a moment of silence, and then Eda was speaking, “Principal Bump told us what happened.”

They were met with more silence, so Raine pushed, “Is it true you hit that boy?”

Hunter shrugged again, but he did give a verbal response this time as well, “Yes.”

They all shared a look, and then Raine asked, “Why did you hit him? Principal Bump said you didn’t share much, and he only showed up when you had hit Jax.”

Hunter looked up at them between loose strands of blonde hair hanging in front of his face, “What did Jax say?”

“He said he scored a point in the match you guys were playing and he was gloating a bit and you hit him,” Darius answered him, sounding unamused.

“And do you believe him?” Hunter asked.

“Of course, I don’t. That’s why I want you to tell me what happened,” Darius told him, crossing his arms in the process.

Hunter’s fingers twitched and pressed against each other, and he clasped his hands tightly together a few times as he tried to work up the nerve to explain what happened, “He was being mean to my friend, so I punched him. That’s all.”

That wasn’t all, but he didn’t want to add the last part because he was terrified they’d only hate him for it. Not like they’d agree with him now anyway, but…

“It doesn’t matter why I hit him anyway, I shouldn’t have done it,” He said bluntly.

“Well… It really depends on context, little one,” Darius kept on, “What exactly was he saying?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Hunter was answering the questions quickly.

“Kid—” Eda tried, but Hunter lifted his head to glare at all of them and it stopped her immediately.

“I said I don’t want to talk about it,” He snapped, “Does it matter what happened? It was bad, I’m bad, I don’t know how to fix it, so maybe you should just- you should just get rid of me now!”

All of them were surprised to hear that, eyes widening with shock. Raine’s voice raised a little, more with concern than anything else, “And why would we ever do such a thing to you?”

“Because– It’s what you’re supposed to do!” He stood up quickly, throwing his arms out as the bench slammed against the wall behind him with the force of his movement, “It’s what everyone does!”

Eda’s eyebrows pulled together in concern, and she took a step forward, reaching out a hand gently, “Hunter, what are you saying?”

“Don’t act like it wasn’t your first instinct too!” He yelled, “You didn’t want anything to do with me until recently, and all you did was ignore me in the Emperor’s Coven!” He directed his attention to Raine, and then to Darius, “And Darius, you-you always wanted me gone! You wanted your mentor, you wanted Jasper! I’m his stupid replacement, and that’s why you always treated me like shit!”

They all looked like they felt horribly guilty, but they weren't backing down; Darius tried, "Hunter, that's not—"

"No, stop it!" He shut him up fast, "It's not even your fault! None of you are at fault here! It's– It's all *me.* I'm the reason for all of this! Eda couldn't trust me because I tried to hurt her family, and I was just so mean and cruel that I was that unlikeable for Raine, and Darius your mentor was murdered and I'm his replacement and you never wanted that, you never wanted *me!"*

Darius clenched his fist, "Hunter, please—"

"And it's not just you guys, it's everyone!" Hunter closed his eyes and lifted his hands to his head, balling his fists as if he were shielding himself from being hurt, "I keep messing up, everyone always mistrusts me in the beginning and I'm starting to think their first instincts were right! I'm not normal like all the other students, I'm not a witch or even a human, I'm a mistake! I should've never been created!"

"Hunter!" Darius snapped, his tone so low and booming that it made Hunter flinch.

He lifted his gaze to the man, eyes wide with fear and ears folded back to show it. He slapped his hands over his mouth as the reality of what he had just said sunk in. Tears burned his eyes, and he stepped back, "I-I'm sorry. I didn't— I just—"

Darius' gaze softened when he saw the look on Hunter's face, and he exhaled to relax his posture, "No, I—"

He reached out for Hunter, but he stopped in his tracks when Hunter closed his eyes and braced himself for impact. Darius was horrified. Hunter couldn't possibly think he'd ever hurt him. Could he? Darius pulled his hand back as he took in what had just happened, and Raine put a hand on his arm to comfort him.

Hunter opened his eyes when the silence surrounded him, and when he looked at the three standing before him again, he felt like crying. Darius had a look in his eyes that made guilt and shame twist Hunter's guts and made him feel like throwing up. Eda and Raine held similar expressions. Hunter couldn't take this anymore, he had to get out.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," He apologized with a weak and cracking voice.

He grabbed his palisman staff off of the bench and before any of his guardians could stop him, he turned heel and ran.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading!! leave a review if you'd like!! despite my urge to post all of the chapters all at once, i need to space them out, so the next chapter will be up on thursday. until then, have a nice day/night!!

Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

> Hunter's and his guardians talk about what happened during the flyer derby scrimmage and after, and just maybe Hunter will come out of it with a different perspective.

Chapter Notes

> idk if you guys know this, but it's nycc toh panel day!! i'm super excited for it, so i decided to post this chapter early cuz i wouldn't have the time to do it later today. i wanna say this is the last chapter that leans heavy into the angst, it gets quite fluffy from here on out. so, plz enjoy this chapter, i really like this one and it may be one of my favorites from the whole fic!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hunter didn’t run very far after leaving his guardians in the hall. He wanted to run home, or into the woods like he did after he’d discovered what he was and who Belos really was, but he didn’t. Instead, he stumbled down the steps at the front of the school about halfway, stopped and contemplated his next move, and then he sat down. He wanted to run, he didn’t want to see anyone right now, but at the same time he didn’t want to be truly alone. Somewhere inside, he hoped someone would come after him. If anyone truly cared, they would. If no one did, then that’s when he would leave.

So, there he sat in the middle of the steps at the school’s entryway and exit, knees pulled up and arms wrapped around them, face half hidden against them. He had tears fighting to break free, but he’d trained himself very well not to cry. He was making some awful sounds though, sounds that would make anyone think he was crying if they weren’t looking directly at his face, though his expression was crumpled and sad. He felt so broken, but then again, he had for a while now.

He felt so horrible too. He’d yelled at his guardians, accused them of hating him, and he’d even flinched and braced himself when Darius lifted a hand! Darius had sworn he’d never hurt him, they all had, so why was he having such a hard time believing them? He wanted to trust them, he knows he should, but it was the hardest thing to do. He’s so scared all of the time and he’s tired of it. His eyes burned harsher, but he swiped the back of a hand across them to keep the tears from escaping. He wouldn’t allow himself to cry, he was tired of feeling weak.

He dropped his arm back around his legs and his shoulders tensed when the door behind him slammed open. He heard footsteps rush out and it took everything in his power not to look over his shoulder to see who it was who had come out. The footsteps slowed though, as if recognizing the boy on the steps and immediately calming down. They still approached, but slower. Hunter hated the way he tensed up as the footsteps drew nearer.

Soon, they were close and then someone was sitting next to him. He didn’t look up to see who it was, but when they spoke in such a calm and almost soothing voice Hunter knew who it was, “You

really scared us back there."

Raine didn't sound mad, they sounded calm if not also concerned, "I don't think I've ever run so fast in my life."

They chuckled, and Hunter shifted a little as his brain formulated an apology, "I'm sorry…"

Raine exhaled and smiled kindly, "It's alright. We just want to know that you're okay."

Hunter scoffed, "After everything I said back there and you're still worried about me?"

He didn't sound like he believed them, and Raine frowned when Hunter spoke; they shrugged loosely, barely even noticeable, "Well, of course, Hunter. We care about you; we want you to be safe and happy."

Hunter lifted his hands and pressed the bottoms of his palms to his temples, squeezing his eyes tightly shut as he laughed something lacking emotion, "Can everyone just stop with that crap?"

Raine raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"I mean stop acting like you care! All of you act like you actually give a shit about me, but you don't!" He tried to get it through to them, his hands anxiously waving around.

And Raine was ever so patient, "Why do you believe that to be true, Hunter?"

"B-Because it is! Why on Titan would anyone actually care about *me?!"* He shouted in panic, "All I do is mess everything up! I hit someone today, I broke his nose! That's not something a good person does, Raine!"

Raine shrugged again, "I don't know, Hunter. You never told us why you hit him so I can't judge you for anything you've done."

Hunter narrowed his eyes and glared at the ground at the bottom of the steps, "I did tell you."

"No, you told us half of it," They replied.

"So? Jax told you what happened, just believe him," Hunter grumbled out, resting his chin on top of his knees.

Raine shook their head, "No, I won't believe him because his story doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't it?" Hunter questioned, irritated with this conversation.

"No, it doesn't," Raine stated again, firmly this time, "I don't believe you'd ever do such a thing because of something as simple as being a sore-loser."

"Well, start believing it, Raine!" Hunter snapped, "We both know I've never been good at controlling my temper! How do you think I got this?!"

He pointed to the large scar on his face, spanning from his neck and up his jaw and cheek, stopping about halfway to his right eye. Raine had to hold back a gasp when he rattled on like that, and their eyes went wide with surprise. Everyone knew Belos had put that mark on the teenager's face, but no one had ever said anything about it. Raine wanted to go back in time so badly and mention it to him, it may have saved him a world of hurt.

Hunter slumped again, hiding the lower half of his face behind his legs and fighting at tears again,

his voice noticeably weaker, “I just keep messing up… I can’t do anything right, so I don’t see any point in keeping me around…”

Raine’s expression became somehow sadder than it already was, “Hunter, making mistakes is normal. We would never get rid of you for something like this, and we would never get rid of you at all. You’re important to us. We love you.”

Hunter hugged his legs tighter, fingers digging harshly into his shins and eyes becoming more watery, “How can anyone love something like me?”

Raine scooted closer to him, their shoulders nearly touching and Raine turned to him a little to face him better, “We love *someone* like you because you’re a great kid who we see is trying so hard to overcome a horrible fate he escaped. Someone who’s so passionate and kind and smart. Someone who makes his friends and family proud, and someone who makes all of us so happy just to have him in our lives.”

Hunter was having an incredibly difficult time containing his tears now, but he kept on forcing himself to remain strong. He didn’t want to cry in front of anyone, not again, “I-I don’t believe you.”

Raine didn’t know what else to do at this point, so, without being too hasty about it and giving Hunter the opportunity to back out, they turned their body and leaned forward, wrapping Hunter up in a hug. Hunter sucked in a sharp breath and held it, legs uncurling in front of him and arms awkwardly hanging at his sides, stiff.

“This is a hug, Hunter,” Raine explained, holding him firmly, hoping the pressure was comforting to him, “And when people hug you it means they really care about you. People hug you when they want you to feel safe, and that’s what I want for you right now. People hug you when they love you, and I love you *so much,* and I so desperately want you to know that.”

Hunter didn’t know how to react. Everything Raine had just said shot him through the heart and it hurt so badly but at the same time it was so relieving to hear. He felt the love and care in Raine’s hug, and he felt safe, and he wanted to believe this was all real so badly, that all of these feelings were real, but it was so hard.

Hunter sniffed, tears brimming right on the edge, “How do I believe you?”

“It takes time but spend some more time with us and you’ll get there,” Raine squeezed him a little tighter, “I promise.”

Hunter relaxed ever so slightly in Raine’s embrace, leaning his head against their shoulder and taking the comfort as it came. He didn’t hug them back, but he doesn’t think that’s what Raine wanted anyway. They wanted him to understand what they were saying, and Hunter was trying to. They said it would take time to trust them all, so maybe he should give it more time after all.

Flapjack nuzzled his leg where she’d been sitting next to him this entire time, incredibly close. She chirped. *Love you. Love Hunter. Love you.* He wanted to reach around and pet her, let her know he understood, but he couldn’t reach her from the angle he was at. That was okay though, she didn’t make a move to get onto his shoulder or move closer to his hand, she knew he needed the comfort of Raine right now, so she let him be for the time being.

Before any of them knew it, the door was once again slamming open and Hunter flinched away from Raine, and Raine easily let him go, not wanting to restrain him. Hunter sniffled and wiped at his face to make sure no tears had gotten free, and he turned back to face ahead of him and placed a

hand on Flapjack still curled up next to him.

He heard the footsteps come down the steps quickly, but they slowed noticeably as they got closer to the two seated closer towards the bottom. Raine looked up at the two who had approached, but Hunter kept his eyes forward. It was quiet for a moment, and then Hunter felt someone take a seat on the other side of him, and he saw Darius sit a few steps down, turned slightly to look at him.

Great, he had to talk about it all over again.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” That was Eda. She didn’t use nicknames like that on people often, usually only reserved them for her kids, which he supposes he now counted as.

He shrugged in response, avoiding looking at any of them. There was another brief silence, and then Darius was speaking up, “Hunter, I’m very sorry for shouting inside, and I apologize for reaching for you so suddenly. I didn’t mean to scare you, but I did. Please know I would *never* lay a hand on you. Not *ever.”*

Hunter bit his lip harshly and nodded, “I know you all keep saying that… It’s hard to believe it, I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay, kid. You went through a lot growing up, none of us can even begin to fathom all of the shit you went through,” Eda tried to reassure him, “But look at you now. You made it to the other side and you’re doing better.”

“I don’t feel like I’m doing better,” He admitted, clasping his hands together and squeezing.

“You’re doing wonderful,” Eda told him, then she lifted a hand very slowly, “Can I touch you?”

When he nodded, she set her hand on his upper back and on the back of his neck, stroking her fingers through his blonde hair. She smiled when he relaxed under her hand, and she scooted closer but kept her distance so as not to squish Flapjack sitting between them.

“You’re a great kid, it just takes time to get better,” She said it so kindly and she’s told it to him so many times, and she’d keep doing it until he believed her.

Hunter sniffled, relaxing even more as Eda continued to rake her fingers through his hair softly, “I’m sorry about what I said inside. I didn’t mean it.”

Darius turned a little more towards him, pulling a leg up and leaning against the step behind him a little more, “Yes, you did. And we don’t blame you.”

Hunter once again fought at tears, “I don’t want any of you to be upset with me.”

Raine chuckled and nudged his leg with theirs, “We’re not. Listen, back in the Emperor’s Coven… we were all going through a lot. I can’t tell you how badly I wanted to reach out to you. I saw you come out of Belos’ quarters many times, worse for wear a lot of the time… I should’ve said something.”

Hunter shook his head, “No, you and Darius were planning a rebellion. I can’t fault you for not helping me, I would’ve tried to tell Belos about your plan if you had.”

Darius shook his head, “Things were complicated back then, but the guilt we feel is still real and as it should be. We should’ve helped you sooner, Hunter. There was a way to handle the situation without everything crumbling around us. We should’ve found a way.”

Hunter didn't know what to say to that, so he just frowned and stayed silent. Darius shared a look with both Eda and Raine and then he continued, "And about my mentor, Jasper… It was in no way your fault what happened to him, and I never blamed you for his demise."

Hunter avoided his eyes, "But you always hated looking at me, right?"

Darius sighed and he adjusted in his spot on the step to lean closer to Hunter, to try and catch his eyes, and his position a few steps lower than the boy helped him to do just that. They locked eyes and Darius tried to get through to him firmly, "I was mourning the loss of someone incredibly important to me, but I should have never allowed that to make me treat someone else who's incredibly important to me the way that I did. I'm sorry for the way I acted when you were younger, none of it was ever your fault. You were just a child. You are still but a child."

"And I should've done something sooner too," Eda cut in when Darius finished his apology, "The first time I saw your face I could tell something wasn't right, and I tried to brush it off as you being a soldier, but then again, a kid your age shouldn't even be a soldier in the first place. You were jumpy and ill… If I could go back in time, I would've taken you home with me after what happened at Eclipse Lake."

Hunter shook his head again, that annoying cowlick falling into his face as it bounced, "It's not like I would've gone willingly with any of you. I was brainwashed into thinking Belos had the right idea and that wild magic was dangerous. Getting me from back then to believe or trust any of you had a pretty low success rate."

"And like I said: we should've found a way," Darius said again, "We *could've* found a way."

Hunter exhaled deeply, this entire conversation exhausting. The day had started off so great too, and now he was having a mentally draining conversation with his guardians and now he was realizing his friends were probably wondering about him too. Were they upset? He had thought these three were, but they were being so kind and gentle now. He hoped the others reacted this way as well.

"I'm still sorry for what I said," He said, his limbs pulled tight together as if he were trying to make himself look small.

"Water under the bridge, kid," Eda said, ruffling his hair gently; he could hear the smile in her voice.

"Besides, you have nothing to apologize for," Raine nudged him again; they were smiling too.

Hunter looked at his shoes, fingers fidgeting nervously, and he asked, "Will I ever get over these feelings?"

The three adults shared a look, and Eda ended up being the one to answer him, "Honestly, kid? No, not completely."

Hunter frowned and to everyone's surprise he let his head fall against Eda's shoulder. She was quick to let her hand come to rest on his back, rubbing up and down soothingly. Hunter's voice shook when he spoke again, "If I'm gunna feel like this for the rest of my life I'm starting to wonder if it's worth it."

Despite the panic that seized them all at his words, no one made him feel bad for them. Instead, Eda reached across her lap with her free hand and grabbed his wrist, gently squeezing it, "Oh trust me, it is."

Hunter sniffled and his voice just kept getting weaker, “How do you know?”

She continued to rub his back, “I just do, kid. Sometimes, these feelings make you question if life really is worth it if you’re going to feel bad about existing all the time, but the thing is, is that you’re not going to be feeling this feeling all the time. You have days where you feel better, weeks even, maybe even months. The sad and painful thoughts still happen, trust me, but with a little help from all of us and your friends, things aren’t so bad.”

She glanced down at him, making sure she had his attention, and when she knew she did she kept on going, “Like today, before all of this happened, you were having fun, right?”

Hunter was pretty sure he was, so he nodded, “Yeah, I think so…”

“And that’s exactly what I mean,” Eda told him, “You like playing Flyer Derby with your friends, and hanging out with them and going out for ice cream and to the movies. You like rattling on about dinosaurs and the history of magic to King and Luz, and we love to hear it too. You love to read, and you like the ocean. You like looking at the stars, and you love to debate Luz and Amity on their favorite book series.”

“You’re starting to get better at cooking as well, you seem to really enjoy it,” Raine remembered.

“And your sewing isn’t half-bad these days either,” Darius threw in as well, “I even heard you’re crocheting too now? King showed me the little stuffed toy you made him, it looks good. You must enjoy doing that a lot as well.”

“What else do you like?” Eda asked, twirling a strand of his hair around her finger.

He thought for a minute, sniffling again, “I like… the snow on The Knee… and I like the rain in the human realm, it smells nice.”

“Those are great things. Anything else?” Raine asked.

“Um… I liked Halloween in the human realm too. Everyone dresses up and people give out candy. We carved pumpkins then, that was nice,” He said, “And Christmas too. It’s pretty, there’s lots of lights. Mrs. Noceda got me presents.”

“What did she get you?” Darius asked, a smile on his face now as Hunter told them about the things he enjoyed.

“Some books, a new frog plush because the old one got left behind at the palace, and these gloves,” He showed them his gloves, black and a bit tighter fitting, the pressure probably comforting for him.

“They’re very nice,” Raine said.

“See? There’s a whole bunch of stuff in life to stick around for,” Eda told him with a smile, “How are you feeling now?”

Lighter. Calmer. Sad, but not like before. Less angry, less hurt. The feelings weren’t gone, but the way they felt now, he knew he could bear it.

Oh.

“Good,” He said and lifted his head to look at them all.

They were smiling, they were proud of him. They were happy for him, and they were happy to be here with him.

He never knew this much love existed in the world, and he definitely didn't think it could've been out there for him.

"Would you like to tell us what happened?" Darius asked, "You can say no."

Hunter swallowed, but he nodded, "Yes."

"The floor is yours," Eda told him, never letting him go.

Hunter's hands clasped together tightly again, and his heart was racing when he told them what had happened, "He called me weak and insinuated that I was a coward for running away from Belos. I know I shouldn't have punched him, it was wrong of me to react that way and I'm—"

"Good for you," Darius cut him off.

Hunter lifted his head again to look at the man, and he had a dumbfounded expression on his face, "What?"

"Yeah, no, that kid deserved a punch in the face for that one," Eda agreed with Darius.

"Even I would've hit someone for that," Raine agreed as well.

"Huh? But— Isn't hitting people bad? I shouldn't be doing that!" Hunter was expecting ridicule still, a scolding for acting out, but instead they were… *praising him?*

"If you hit him for the reason he claimed, then yes, it would be bad," Darius leaned back on his hands, "But you hit him because he said something incredibly horrible to you. We can't be mad at you for reacting the way that you did."

"Hell, it makes me mad just thinking about it," Eda said with a shrug, "I couldn't imagine being told that to my face. You're lucky I wasn't there, kid. I would've turned him into a frog."

"I know an eternal sleeping spell," Raine suggested.

Hunter was so confused, "So… You're not mad at me?"

"We never were," Eda told him, patting his shoulder.

"When we got the call that there had been an altercation between you and another student we rushed right over," Raine chuckled, "We were so worried. You should've seen Darius."

Darius' face flushed and he glared at the bard, "Our son could have been hurt, what did you expect of me?!"

Raine laughed in response to his annoyance, and Eda joined in on teasing Darius as well. Hunter had frozen, what Darius had said hitting him differently. He stared at the man as he snapped at the other two to shut up and quit bothering him. He crossed his arms and turned his nose up snobbishly, but only for a moment as he felt Hunter's gaze on him.

He turned his head to catch the boy's eyes and he asked, "Is something wrong?"

Hunter blinked, and he shook his head, lifting a hand to gesture towards his guardian, "N-No, it's just— You called me— your son."

The realization struck Darius and his posture relaxed. It took him a moment to formulate a thought, and when he did, he confirmed Hunter's statement, "Yes, I did. Is that alright with you?"

Hunter felt the hair on his arms and neck stand up, an emotion he didn't feel often taking hold. He thinks it was something akin to pure joy. He nodded, "Y-Yeah, it's fine with me."

Darius smiled softly, exhaling through his nose and relaxing further, "Good."

Eda and Raine had the same look on their faces during the short conversation. Raine reached over and placed a hand on Hunter's shoulder, "Are you feeling alright?"

Hunter nodded, "Yeah, I'm feeling better."

"That's good to hear," They smiled, "Would you like to sit here a little longer? We can talk more if you'd like."

Hunter thought about that for a second and looked around at all three of his guardians. They were all looking at him so kindly, and they were all so patient with him. None of them were angry about what had happened, they had actually been worried about him above all else when they got the call from the Principal. They say they cared about him, and that they love him. Perhaps he's starting to see that a little clearer, even if it is slow moving.

"Actually, can we go home?" He asked.

They were all happy to accept; Darius confirmed it, "Of course."

And they all stood up and headed down the rest of the steps, Flapjack flying up to perch on Hunter's shoulder. They decided to walk home, they needed a little extra conversation. They may have even pulled a smile out of Hunter on the trip back.

- - -

He had detention on Monday, that was to be expected. Darius, Raine, and Eda had all told him he hadn't really done anything bad, but he did break a kid's nose on the playing field by socking him one, so he needed to be punished by the school. He actually had detention all week, so he wasn't really looking forward to any of that. He'd never been in detention before, but apparently all three of his guardians had and they had given him the rundown. It didn't sound that bad, he'd definitely gone through worse in his time. Detention just sounded sort of boring, but he'd get by.

He'd been home for about an hour now, and when he'd come in the door King had been there ready to ramble on about something but seeing the look on his brother's face had stopped him. He had offered him some of the candy he had been eating, and he had hugged him around his leg before leaving him alone. Hunter had gone straight upstairs after reassuring everyone that he was fine for about the hundredth time, telling them he just needed some time alone, and they finally understood and let him go. He stumbled clumsily up the stairs, went to his room and tossed his bag aside, and now he was here, lying in bed.

Flapjack was curled up in her bed near the window, sleeping soundly after she'd made sure her boy was okay. Hunter was laying on his back and staring up the ceiling, rerunning the events of the day through his head over and over again. He really didn't want to think about it, it was one of those things that was hard to think about, but he kept pondering the thoughts anyway. Despite his guardians being able to calm him down to an acceptable level to bring him back home, he was still feeling bad about everything that had happened. And odd.

A door slammed, a voice yelled out a greeting, and then quick and heavy footsteps ran up the

stairs. Hunter knew who it was, he recognized the voice, so when she slammed into the room, he didn't even flinch.

Luz stood in the doorway, panting heavily from running Titan knows how long, and a little bit of sweat on her brow. She looked nervous and worried, "Hunter, there you are! What happened? You had us all worried!"

He grimaced, "I'm sorry. I kind of had an argument with Darius, Raine, and Eda and got overwhelmed by that, I didn't have the energy to confront you guys about what happened too."

That makes sense, but still, "You could've at least texted us to let us know you were okay," She scolded, pulling out her scroll after tossing away her backpack, going to text their friends in the group chat they had made. When she was done with that, she frowned and looked at him again, "What happened between you four?"

Hunter shrugged, "Y'know, the classic Hunter *'nobody actually likes me and is just pretending to'* routine."

Luz somehow frowned deeper, "Hunter…"

"I know, it's stupid. I shouldn't think like that, but… Well…" He trailed off, hoping she got the idea.

She did, and she understood it was hard for him to change his mindset, but that didn't make it any less upsetting. She wanted him to know he was loved, they all did. She pocketed her scroll, and she stepped over to the bed. He didn't protest when she crawled onto the mattress, the bed squeaking as she laid down next to him. She grabbed his wrist, squeezing gently, "Can I hug you?"

He scoffed, somewhat amused, "You don't have to ask."

"Yes, I do," She said, "Yes or no?"

He was quiet for a moment, debating if he wanted a hug right now, and when it set in that this was Luz that was asking and that she always gave the best hugs, the answer was pretty simple, "Yes."

She rolled onto her side and reached out her arms, pulling him close. His head fell against her shoulder and she held him with just enough pressure that it was extremely comforting for him. She spoke next, "I'm always here for you. You know that, right?"

He nodded the best that he could against her shoulder, "I know…"

"Then stop taking all of this on yourself," She scolded gently, squeezing a little tighter, "We're all always here for you when you need us, and we won't judge you for the problems you're having."

"You might," He replied, his voice somewhat muffled by her shoulder.

"We won't," She promised.

"I don't know… My problems are pretty unnatural compared to the regular kid problems, so I've been told," He admitted.

Luz pulled away a little, hands on his shoulders to look at him, concerned, "Who told you that?"

Hunter shrugged, trying not to look at her but it was kind of hard with how close they were, "Not every class is spent with one of you guys."

“Is someone bullying you, Hunter?” She asked firmly, and he could hear irritation building in her tone though not directed at him.

“It’s fine, Luz. I can handle myself. I thought I made that very obvious today,” He grumbled the last part, hoping it would go mostly unheard, but he didn’t get that lucky.

Luz actually chuckled at it though, “Yeah, I guess that’s true. I know you can handle yourself, but if people are getting too much, I promise we can help.”

He smiled just slightly, “Thanks.”

She leaned back in to hug him again, “So, did things get resolved between you and the others?”

Hunter nodded, “Yeah, they weren’t mad at me for punching Jax, but I kind of accused them of some horrible things and then I made Darius feel bad and— Well, it was a huge mess. But we cleared it up.”

“That’s good,” Luz said, “So, why are you up here pouting all by yourself?”

Hunter chewed on his lip for a moment, kicking his leg a little with nervous energy, and then he admitted, “Darius called me their son.”

Luz sat up, leaning over him and eyes wide, “He what?!”

Hunter slapped his hands over his face, “I know! It was so… I don’t even know!”

Luz grinned, suddenly all giddy, “Oh my gosh, that’s amazing, Hunter! I bet you just feel over the moon!”

She threw her arms up excitedly, and when Hunter dropped his hands from in front of his face he frowned, “I don’t know how to feel… I think I’m happy, but I also feel sort of guilty.”

Luz raised an eyebrow, “Why’s that?”

“I guess I just feel like… I don’t deserve it,” He said quietly, and it made Luz’s expression crumple.

“Why wouldn’t you deserve it, Hunter?” She questioned, her tone falling softer.

He shrugged yet again, “I just… I did a lot of really bad things in the Emperor’s Coven, I don’t think I deserve to be rewarded for that.”

“Hunter—”

“No Luz, listen,” He stopped her and sat up, holding up a hand to keep her from talking over him, “I arrested so many innocent people, brought them to the Emperor’s Coven where they forcibly had sigils put on them, permanent sigils. I ruined lives, and I took joy in it because I thought it was the right thing to do. I thought I was helping those people, and I thought I was putting dangerous people in the conformatorium and prohibiting them from hurting anyone ever again, but it turns out all of those people were innocent, and I was the bad guy the whole time. I shouldn’t be rewarded for that; I should be punished.”

She was quick to set her hands on his shoulders, leveling him with the serious Luz Noceda expression, “Alright, I listened, now you listen. Everything you did then were things you thought you had to, things that you thought were good, and not to mention Belos was always hanging over

your shoulder waiting for you to mess up just so he could be a huge jackass!"

"He never made me force you and Eda to kill the Selkidomus, and he never made me threaten you to your girlfriend and try to hurt her and King," He told her, "And he didn't make me kidnap the first friends I ever had to send them away to the Emperor's Coven to have them forcibly thrown into a coven!"

"Okay, but you seemed grossed out by the Selkidomus and we didn't actually kill it," Luz admitted to him, "And also I know you'd never actually hurt a fly, you just liked talking big and Amity knows this, didn't we talk about this already?"

"I still kidnapped my friends," Hunter reminded her.

"Yeah, because they all seem to hate you *sooo* much for that," She rolled her eyes, and when he looked taken aback and somewhat frightened by what she had said she had to reassure him, "I was being sarcastic, they all love you so much."

He sighed in relief, and then he looked down at the mattress between them, picking at the sheets between his fingers, "I still did those things though, Luz. Whether or not everyone forgave me, I still messed up. I was a horrible person."

She let her hands fall from his shoulders, grabbing his wrists instead and squeezing them; he looked at her face and saw such a sweet smile pulling at her lips, "You were never a horrible person, Hunter. You're nice and super sweet and funny and while you might've been a little cranky when we first met, I always sort of liked you."

Hunter scoffed and shook his head, "No you didn't."

"No, really! I did!" She giggled, "You know, you were trying really hard to push me away, and I guess that had something to do with Belos, but you told me your name because you wanted to be someone besides the Golden Guard. I knew from that moment that you really weren't so bad; you just needed a friend."

He can't lie and act like that didn't warm him up, and he couldn't hide the smile that showed up on his face either, "I'm glad I met you, Luz."

If he wasn't mistaken, he could've sworn he saw tears in her eyes, and she let go of his wrists and opened and closed her fists a few times; he rolled his eyes, amused, "You can hug me—"

She squealed and jumped forward, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding him tight, "You're amazing, Hunter. I'm glad I met you, too."

He smiled softly and for once lifted his arms to return the hug, his hold not quite as tight and sort of awkward, but it was comfortable, and he relaxed against her. He was feeling better now, at least for the most part. He just needed to talk it all over with his friends now, but that could wait until Monday. For now, he let Luz hug him, and he may or may not have fallen asleep.

- - -

Flapjack hopped around on his shoulder as he walked to the front of the school with Luz. She was chirping happily, and it made Hunter chuckle as she bounced around. She got some apple chunks this morning at breakfast and she was so happy about it, it was making her whole day.

He's glad she was happy, because he was feeling nervous. Today was Monday, and it was the first day he'd see his friends again since the incident last week. Luz had told him not to be nervous, that

no one was mad at him, but she knew that wasn't easy for him. He was often thinking he was doing things wrong and ruining things, and even if he was getting better, it was still hard to break that way of thinking.

"There they are," Luz told him, nudging him with her elbow to give him a head's up, "Just breathe. They're just worried about you, that's all."

"Right. Worried, not mad," He repeated what she had told him earlier this morning.

"Exactly," Luz nodded, then she tilted her head forwards, "Now come on."

He took a deep breath and nodded, following her. He grabbed at the straps of his backpack anxiously, holding them tightly and approaching their friends with Luz, though he was trailing behind her somewhat. Luz smiled as they reached the steps, bouncing on the balls of her feet, "Hey guys!"

They all greeted her, and then they saw Hunter. Understandably, they jumped up. Gus was the first to reach him, "Dude, where have you been?!"

Hunter flinched when Gus stumbled up to him, staring up at him with an anxious and concerned expression; the others followed suit. He saw Viney, Skara, Willow, and Amity here as well, and they were all silent as they waited for him to explain. He lifted a hand and averted his eyes to the ground, setting his hand on the back of his head and scratching, ruffling his hair a bit, "Sorry, I had a rough weekend, so I just stayed at home. I should've texted you guys."

"Are you okay?" Viney asked, crossing her arms and shifting her weight onto one leg.

"Yeah, I'm fine," He reassured them all with a nervous little smile, "I didn't mean to worry all of you."

"Well, you did!" Skara threw her arms out, "After you got sent to Bump's on Friday, we were all worried to death!"

"Yeah, we thought you got expelled or something," Viney said, "Jax is apparently rich or something and his parents are pretty important, so I've heard."

Amity rolled her eyes and dismissed that immediately, "He's not so important anymore after what happened with his mom. Besides, Bump wouldn't have expelled Hunter for punching a guy, way worse things have happened here."

"Well… I guess that's true," Viney shrugged.

"Edric blew up a rat once," Amity said with a shake of her head, "He cried for a week."

They all made noises of disgust and shivered, and after Hunter was finished grimacing at the mental image Amity had put into his head, he told them, "Expulsion wasn't discussed, but unfortunately, I did get detention all week. A much-deserved punishment though, I suppose."

"Bullshit. That Jax dude deserved a good punch in the face," Viney scoffed.

"Yeah, he was a huge jerk," Skara had to agree.

"Dude, you punched him so hard! I heard his nose crack and everything! It was so gross!" Gus rambled on, though for some reason he sounded cheerful about it.

“I can’t say I blame you for what you did,” Amity shrugged, “I would’ve done the same in your shoes.”

“She almost did,” Luz whispered, earning a playful shove from her girlfriend that made her giggle.

“Anyway, you won’t be alone in detention at least,” Gus playfully punched him on the arm.

Hunter’s eyebrows pulled together in confusion, “What do you mean?”

“Oh, Luz didn’t tell you?” Viney asked, then she smirked, “We got detention too.”

Hunter’s eyes widened, “What?! Why?! What did you guys do?!”

“I told Bump that I called Jax some names,” She shrugged, not seeing detention as a big deal.

“I told him I was the one that blew up the trash can in potions last week,” Skara admitted.

“Did you?” He asked them both.

“Nope!” Viney answered, “But we didn’t want our friend to be stuck in detention all by himself on only his second week of school here. Besides, I’m kind of a detention champion at this point so I’ll show you the ropes.”

“It’s true, she’s so cool,” Luz told Hunter excitedly.

Hunter looked around at all of his friends, “All of you got detention? Just to spend it with me?”

“Yep!” Gus beamed, “We got your back, man.”

He lightly hit Hunter on the arm again and that’s when the bell sounded off, all of the students sitting outside getting up and heading for the entrance; Gus gestured for him to follow, “Come on, there’s a presentation in the gym, you can tell us about your weekend in there if you want.”

It took a moment for Hunter to comprehend what Gus had just said, but after a second to think he nodded, “O-Oh yeah, sure. I—”

He went to step forward but stopped when he saw Willow standing nearby, hands folded in front of her waist and looking like she wanted to say something to him. Gus got the message, and so did everyone else, “I’ll save a seat for you.”

“Okay…” He said, watching Gus and his other friends walk away and when they were inside, he looked at Willow; they were the only two left outside. Hunter’s fists closed at his sides, and he swallowed nervously, “Willow, about Friday… I’m sorry for ruining the scrimmage. It had to be cut short because of me, I—”

“Are you kidding me?” She stopped him there and looking at her face he saw she was frowning deeply; she looked sad, “Hunter, he pushed you from such a high up place, you could’ve *died.* He ruined practice, not you.”

Hunter’s hands and fingers fidgeted, wiggling anxiously and pulling at wrinkles in his shirt, “I still shouldn’t have hit him…”

He turned his head to the side and slightly downwards, pouting. Willow tilted her head, “Hunter…”

“No, it was foolish of me,” He stopped her before she could defend him, “I didn’t mean to take

control of the conversation, I know you can handle yourself just fine. I just couldn't stand what he was saying about you, he was completely wrong. I'm sorry for what I did, I should've let you handle it. You told me you could."

Willow shook her head, "Hunter, we both know I'm not the reason you hit him," He didn't reply to that, just kept his gaze focused on the ground. Willow stepped closer to him, but she didn't attempt to catch his eyes, just kept talking, "He said something horrible to you, and he stepped way out of line. I'm not mad at you for that."

His ears twitched and perked up, and he caught her eyes and straightened his posture, "You're not?"

She giggled, "No, of course not. I just… I wish that you had texted me, or called me, or any of us for that matter! We had to learn that you were okay through Luz! I was worrying myself sick over you."

"Oh," Was all he said for a moment, his brain taking a moment to come up with something else to say, but it eventually did, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you cared that much about me."

"Of course, I do," She was chuckling, but it sounded more like she was in disbelief of what he was saying, and she stepped even closer, "You're important to me, Hunter. Please understand that."

She was standing awfully close, and he was trying really hard not to think about that fact, "I'm trying my best."

She smiled sweetly, "That's what counts."

She was always so kind to him, even back when they first met and he'd nearly screwed everything up, she had been willing to give him a second chance. He doesn't know what he did to deserve a friend like her, or any of them for that matter.

"And about you sticking up for me back there," She started, "Even if I can handle myself, I think it was really sweet."

She stood on her toes and before he could even react, she was pressing a kiss to his cheek, right over the scar that lay there. He had to hold in a squeak and when she stepped back, she could clearly see how red his face was. It was only then that she seemed to realize what she had done, and her cheeks flushed a similar shade, her eyes wide and a nervous giggle escaping her throat.

"A-Anyway, we should head inside so we don't get in trouble for being late," She jutted a thumb over her shoulder towards the entrance just up the steps.

Hunter nodded maybe a little too vigorously, "Y-Yeah, we already got detention we don't wanna make it two weeks!"

"Yeah, right! Exactly!" She said probably a little too loud.

There was another awkward moment of standing around and then Willow cleared her throat and opened her mouth to say something, turning halfway towards the steps, and Hunter nodded, "Yeah, let's go."

"Right," She replied, and then they both turned and went up the steps.

Flapjack chirped in Hunter's ear, and Hunter told her to shut up quietly. The little bird was amused, and as the two teenagers entered the school Flapjack just kept chirping quietly so only Hunter

could hear.

She likes you.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading!! leave and review if you'd like!! now i shall go and emotionally prepare for the new toh content we could be getting today :) i'll post the next chapter on saturday, so until then have a nice day/night!!

Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

> The Emerald Entrails have another encounter with their new and annoying rival, and it sends one of them to the healer's office.

Chapter Notes

> this story is almost over, only two chapters to go omg,, and just in time for the new season to premiere, yay!! idk if you guys saw the leaks on twt but i'd advise you to steer clear cuz im in emotional distress and these leaks are MAJOR SPOILERS. so plz be cautious online rn, i didn't want to see them either and just stumbled across them. be careful.
>
> aside from that though, i'm loving how this fic is coming along and i'm super excited for you guys to get the conclusion!! plz enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You guys teased me all week!” Gus ranted on and on as he threw his arms around, “So excuse me if I’m a little mad!”

They all laughed and Viney replied, “Sorry dude, it’s funny and we needed entertainment.”

“Well could you not find entertainment in literally anything else?!” Gus snapped.

Viney shrugged, “We were in detention, what else were we supposed to do?”

“Not embarrass me in front of Matt?” He suggested, lifting his hands up and down, as if weighing the options.

The week of detention had passed, and it had gone by with a few bumps in the road. Turns out Matt also had detention that week. As it so happens, he was the one who was responsible for blowing up the trash can in potions recently, so Skara just took credit for helping him; Matt didn’t object, just seemed confused as to why she wanted detention so badly. That was beside the point though. The whole week was spent passing jabs at the two boys who obviously liked each other and just refused to talk about their feelings. They all had fun, except for maybe Gus and Matt of course. The thinly concealed secret crush somehow remained just that: a secret.

“Sorry Gus,” Skara walked up behind him and slapped a hand over his shoulder, “You two are just so fun to tease.”

Gus rolled his eyes, “How did I end up stuck with you people as friends.”

“Hey! I didn’t say a thing about either of you all week! Give me some credit!” Hunter defended himself, glaring at the younger boy.

Gus smirked, “And I thank you for that, Hunter. At least somebody cares about me.”

“Oh come on, Gus. We love you too,” Willow said, walking up behind him and throwing her arms around his shoulders, leaning heavily on him and resting her chin on his shoulder, “We just want you and Matt to get along.”

Gus was trying to hide his smile as Willow hugged him and shook him around, “We do get along, we’re just taking things slow.”

“Too slow,” Willow pouted, rolling her head so her cheek was pressed against his shoulder instead.

Gus cast a glance towards Hunter and then lowered his voice so only Willow could hear him, “Look who’s talking.”

Willow’s face flushed and she shot back, releasing Gus and deciding to completely ignore what he had just said by clearing her throat and addressing her team, “Alright! Listen up, team! Gather around!”

“We’re already gathered, Will,” Viney told her with a chuckle.

“Right,” Willow pressed her hands together and tipped them, *“Anyway,* this is our first scrimmage since the incident over a week ago, we need to get our butts in gear because we have our first official game in just a few weeks!”

Skara raised her hand, “Yeah, do we have to play against Swollen Nose again?”

“Yeah, he’s a real downer,” Viney grimaced.

Willow frowned, “Unfortunately, yes. He has volunteered to scrimmage against us again, and this time it will also count as a formal try-out, so we have to pay attention to how well his team plays.”

“Ugh, we’re not gunna have to let him join, are we?” Viney was already complaining.

Willow smiled in hopes of offering reassurance, “Unless he changes how he plays and treats my friends, then you won’t have to worry about that.”

Everyone seemed happy with that. They trusted Willow, they knew she would make decisions that were best for everyone. She opened her mouth to continue speaking, but before she could, Gus was making a sound of disgust and crossing his arms, eyes narrowed, “Speaking of the devil…”

And there came Jax, sauntering up and looking noticeably less smug than last time, and that probably had something to do with the patches on his face and the gray and purple spots around his nose that had just formed a swollen lump on his face. Skara snickered and tried to hide it behind her hand, “Looking good, clown.”

Jax bared his teeth and hissed out, “Watch what you say to me, scum. I’ll have you expelled.”

“Ooh, I’m so scared,” Skara mocked and giggled along with Viney.

Jax made a noise showing his distaste and looked towards Willow, “Captain,” and then at Hunter, “I hope you’re happy with yourself after what you’ve done, Golden Boy. Was detention nice?”

Hunter shrugged, answering honestly, “It was alright, not too bad. A little drafty.”

He rubbed at his bare arm and Jax rolled his eyes, “You deserved worse for what you did to me. You couldn’t possibly imagine the pain I’ve been in all week.”

Hunter shrugged and made a face, “Well, my hand has been hurting a bit. I guess that happens when you hit someone with a thick skull.”

Jax went to leap at him, but Willow stepped in between the boys before he could, “Enough Jax. Let’s just play and get this over with.”

“That eager to be rid of me I see, Park,” He snapped.

Willow narrowed her eyes, *“Let’s play.”*

Jax hummed and spun around, his palisman staff in hand and going with his team to their half of the field to get into position. Willow turned on her heel too, exhaling with annoyance and walking to her position with her team in tow; Hunter jogged to catch up with her, “Are you okay, Willow?”

She perked up to look at him, schooling her expression so she didn’t look as if she were directing her irritation at him, “Oh, I’m fine. That guy’s just a little…”

“Horrible?” Hunter supplemented and when Willow smiled, he did too, “Today will be better! We had some good team bonding in detention, it’ll help up our game!”

Willow giggled at his attempt to make her feel less negative, “Let’s try to get out of this without you nearly dying this time.”

He put a hand on his hip and waved the one with the palisman staff in it around, “Can’t make any promises about that, but I can promise not to hit anyone this time!”

Willow stopped walking and tilted her head, smiling fondly, “That’s a big promise.”

She was teasing, but it made him smile, “Anything for you, Willow.”

She felt her cheeks burn a little, but she didn’t feel embarrassed; she just shook her head and chuckled, “You’re a dork,” She reached up a hand and pointed her fingers, nudging him on the shoulder gently and making him wobble very slightly on the balls of his feet, “Let’s go have some fun out there.”

He smiled back at her and agreed, and the Emerald Entrails took the field. Jax looked as smug about this whole thing as last time, though there was irritation mixed with it this time around. It probably had something to do with the throbbing pain in his face, but they digress. The Entrails were raring to go, and so was Jax’s team, and when Luz from the bleachers blew the whistle, they all took off.

Everyone paid closer attention to their opponents this time, even more than usual. No one wanted a repeat of what happened a couple of weeks ago. Luz and Amity cheered from the bleachers, maybe a little too rowdy for a scrimmage but that was just like them, wasn’t it? The game went noticeably smoother than the last one, and quicker. Maybe it was the anger Jax’s actions had filled them all with that made them all the more determined to win this, so even if Luz and Amity were cheering too hard for a scrimmage match, they were playing too hard, and that was okay. They were having fun.

Gus scored most of the points, and when he passed Jax after scoring them he’d stick out his tongue only to get scolded by Willow for antagonizing. As the game went on Jax became more and more irritated and his smug attitude from the beginning fell away. His team couldn’t keep up, the Entrails were just too fast.

Gus’ flying style was hard to keep track of, and Skara easily evaded anything that was thrown at

her. Hunter was fast as well, and Viney was afraid of nothing. And Willow… Well, she was good at literally everything that had to do with the sport of Flyer Derby. She was fast and strong and strategic; they just couldn't stop her. It didn't help that every time anyone looked at her, she had the most determined look in her eyes they'd ever seen.

Jax should've never taken a jab at their beat up blonde, he was harshly paying for it now with his nose throbbing and dignity down the drain.

The game went on for a while of course, but by the end of it, the Emerald Entrails came out on top. They all flew back to the field and when they hit the ground, Willow threw up her arms and beamed, "Good job, team! You all looked great out there!"

"It's all thanks to having a great Captain!" Viney chirped with a swing of her arm.

"Bring it in, everyone!" Gus held out his arms, and everyone leaned into a group hug.

Willow giggled as she was squished between Gus and Skara, "You guys did amazing today!"

"We were just pumped up, that's all," Viney said before everyone pulled away from each other, though she leaned her arm on Hunter's shoulder and leaned on him a bit, "No one messes with our boy and gets away with it."

She ruffled his hair and he tried to pull away, but he seemed amused by her actions and words. Gus pouted, "I thought I was your guys' boy."

Viney rolled her eyes and grinned, "You're both our boys. That better?"

Gus grinned now too, "Yep! Thanks, Viney!"

Viney giggled and let go of Hunter, and everyone went about gathering their things at that; Luz and Amity ran from the bleachers to congratulate them, Luz nearly tackling Willow in a hug when she got there, "Oh my gosh, you're such a badass, Willow!"

Willow had to laugh at that, "Thanks Luz. And you two are amazing cheerleaders."

She placed her hands on her hips when Luz pulled away, looking at the both of them. Amity shrugged, "What can I say? Luz's optimism rubs off on you."

"Ain't that the truth," Willow agreed.

"Mind sharing a little with me?" Hunter joked as he took off his knee pads, the material too scratchy for his tastes.

Luz crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow, "I don't know, Hunter. I think you're pretty confident in your Flyer Derby abilities."

He stood at his full height, and he had to agree, "Well, at least I'm confident about something, I guess."

"Oh, don't be so down on yourself now, Hunter," Willow smiled sweetly at him, "You're amazing, give yourself some credit."

With his ears burning pink he nodded, "Yeah okay, sorry. I'll try."

"That's all that counts!" Willow chirped, looking sweet as ever. He wasn't sure how he got so lucky to have a friend like her, or like any of them for that matter.

“Hey Entrails!” Oh, and here comes the man to ruin the mood. Jax and his team approached them, stopping just a few feet away; he crossed his arms and looked absolutely vexed, but he bit out, “This did technically count as a tryout, correct? I understand you won, all is fair, but we didn’t play atrociously, now did we?”

Hunter rolled his eyes and turned away, making a face at Luz and Amity that made them have to stifle giggles. Willow remained professional, shaking her head and keeping a straight face, “No, you all played quite well.”

“So, you have a spot for us on the team?” He asked her, seeming hopeful but also incredibly snooty about it.

Willow scanned his team, seeing some nervous faces, and she nodded, “Yeah, I think I can squeeze some of you in. We could use swap-outs, the sport is pretty exhausting so it would be helpful to swap in and out during the span of a game. We could also use some reserves in case someone gets hurt and can’t play.”

“So… did we make the team?” One of Jax’s teammates asked, a short and thin boy who looked nervous about Willow’s answer.

But she just smiled and nodded, “Yeah, I can make arrangements for you guys.”

They all celebrated, cheering and jumping around, high fiving each other, happy to have made the team they so badly wanted to be on. Jax was smiling too, but it was that smug look again and his arms were crossed, “Wise decision, Park. But maybe not for you. You do realize I’ll be coming after your position as Captain?”

Willow held up a hand and stopped him right there, “Oh, I’m sorry, you must be mistaken. I said I can fit *some of you* on the team, not all of you. Sorry Jax, but you didn’t make the cut.”

They’ve never seen someone get so angry so fast. Jax’s eyebrow twitched, *“Excuse me?”*

Willow crossed her arms and explained with ease, “Well, you see, I don’t enable the people who hurt my friends, so rewarding you for doing so would be totally out of my moral code.”

“What?! B-But he’s the one who hit me!” He snapped, throwing his arms around in a fit.

“After you said something really horrible to him!” Willow stood her ground and Hunter’s, “Now, I need you to back off and leave us alone.”

Jax clenched his fists at his sides and squared his shoulders, making a few threatening steps forward, “Do not test me, Park. You don’t want to make me mad.”

Willow narrowed her eyes, “You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

He just glared at her, trying to look bigger and scarier, but nothing he was doing was making her back down. Her weak spot was her friends, so that’s how low he went, “You wouldn’t want any of your little friends to have a bad school year, would you?”

Willow was taken aback a bit by that, but it only made her angrier, “Are you threatening my friends now? That is not the road I’d advise you to take.”

She was practically growling out her words at this point, but Jax seemed pleased with himself, “The little one is a prodigy, right? I’ve seen him getting picked on before, I could make his life even harder here. Or maybe the human girl? She’s already such an odd one around here. Or maybe

I should start with your boyfriend?"

Willow took a step forward now, making him back up a bit, "Leave them alone, Jax. I don't want this to get ugly again."

"Oh, touched a nerve now, have I?" Jax chuckled lowly, "I'm not scared of you, Park."

"You should be," She threatened, stepping even closer but more aggressive this time, hoping to make him back up, "Leave us alone. Threatening me and hurting my friends will not get you a spot on this team, so I don't know what you think you're achieving by doing this."

"Selfish pleasure," He supplied, "Take a hint. I'm not someone you want to be messing with."

"Try me," She snapped, her fists clenched so tight her palms hurt from where her fingernails were digging into her flesh.

Jax looked over her shoulder at her friends who were keeping an eye out on their conversation but not making a leap to jump in just yet. They trusted their captain; they knew she could handle herself. But maybe he could crush that perception they have of her.

"I think I'll start with the Golden Boy," Jax tilted his head, making eye contact with Willow again, "You seem to like him very much, it would be such a shame if something happened to him."

Willow pointed a threatening finger right into his face, "Don't you even try it."

"Protective, are we?" Jax giggled, "I'm an illusionist, you know? And a pretty damn good one. What sort of things do you think he'd love to see again, hm?"

Willow tried not to let her emotions get the best of her, she had prided herself in being calm and collected and knowing how to diffuse a situation. But Jax was trying to make her snap, he was trying to get a reaction out of her. It was working as much as she hated to admit it, but she wasn't going to go further than she was about to.

She shoved him. *Hard.* He didn't fall, but he definitely stumbled back. The motion made her friends perk up, stepping a little closer. She tried to make this very clear, "Don't come near me or my friends again. I'm not a mean person, and I don't like being angry, but if you even so much as make an attempt to hurt one of my friends I will make sure that you never show your face around this school again. Are we clear?"

Jax frowned and glared, smoothing out his rumpled shirt after she shoved him, and she shoved him quite hard. He was irritated, he wanted to shove her back, but she was too focused on him at the moment, and she'd see it coming, "I'm not so sure about that."

Willow's fists clenched somehow harder. Jax sighed, twirling his palisman staff around, "You know, it would be awfully hard to be captain of the team if you were injured and unable to play, wouldn't it?"

Willow's eyebrows twitched, uncomfortable already with what he was insinuating, and she went to take a step back, "What are you—"

He twirled his staff around once more before catching it and biting out, "Take a hint."

He grabbed his staff with both hands and swung it downwards and around, going for her ankles to knock her off of her feet, but Willow never fell and his palisman staff never made contact with her. A flash of golden light and his staff making contact with something later, Hunter toppled to the

ground, yelling out when pain assaulted his senses. He stepped back when the boy hit the ground, reaching for his leg and wincing. He hadn't hit him hard; he had been aiming to scare someone at most, but it was meant for the captain, not for him.

"Hunter!" Almost everyone shouted when he fell.

The blonde's staff turned back into her regular form, checking on her boy before she turned and flew full speed ahead at the boy who had hit him, flying around Jax's head and pecking on him harshly. He shouted in pain and tried to shoo her away, but she was determined.

"Hunter, are you okay?" Luz asked, on her knees next to him.

He was wincing but he lifted a shaky hand, holding up a thumb, "Yep. Never better."

He sounded in pain, and he was trying to hide it. Gus stood up and shouted at Jax, "What the hell is your problem?!"

Jax tried to defend himself, "I didn't mean to actually hit anyone, I was just trying to scare her! B-But— Ow, stop it, bird — The Golden Guard jumped in the way and I-I hit him and— Okay, I get it! Ow!"

"I'll get Principal Bump!" One of Jax's former teammates said, running off, and then another followed, "I'll get the healer!"

"What?! Hey, I didn't— Ouch!" He was trying to defend himself, but Flapjack wasn't easing up; nobody tried to stop her.

"I-I'm fine. I don't think it's broken, it's just—" He tried to go on, but Viney was suddenly at his legs and squeezing gently on his ankle, making him hiss in pain.

"It's fractured for sure," She told him, "I could try to heal this, but it's better left up for a professional to be on the safe side. We should get him to the healer's office."

"Well, he can't walk there!" Skara shouted, then her eyes widened, "Wait! There's some old medical equipment in the gym! Maybe there's a stretcher in there!"

"Good idea! I'll come with you," Gus offered, and they turned to go, but Willow stopped them.

"Don't worry, I'll take him," Willow said, kneeling next to Hunter and making her friends stop in their tracks; she set a hand on his shoulder and checked on him, "I'm gunna splint it really quick, okay?"

He nodded, "Alright."

She leaned over and held her hands out in front of his ankle, using her plant magic to make a makeshift splint out of vines. Once she had secured his ankle and ignored a few sounds of pain coming from him, she turned back to look at his face, "Alright, that should hold until we get to the healer's office. Come on."

He furrowed his eyebrows, "W-Well, how are you going to— Whoa—"

She wrapped an arm under his legs and the other around his shoulders, and she lifted him with ease. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders to support himself and his face burned once he was in her arms and off the ground. He was quite a bit taller than her and she lifted him with ease; she was quite strong.

He didn't really know how to thank her and form any coherent thoughts at the moment, so all he could muster out was a nervous laugh and, "Oh wow, sports!"

Luz laughed and Amity hid her face in her hands, memories flooding her brain. Willow smiled at Hunter, "Comfy?"

He was trying not to look directly into her eyes, "Y-Yep! Very! I mean, uh, yes."

Everyone was desperately trying to hide their amusement, and Willow smiled a little bigger, "Good. The healer's office isn't far. I'll try not to jostle your ankle on the way."

"Yep. Alright. Sounds good," His brain just was not formulating the right thoughts right now, but Willow didn't pay it any mind.

"We'll clean up here. You guys go," Luz assured them.

"Thanks guys," Willow thanked them, smiling sweetly, then he turned away to take Hunter to have his ankle checked out.

Hunter could see his friends making kissy faces and teasing him as he looked over Willow's shoulder, and it made his whole face hot. His ears had lowered, and he tried avoiding looking at anyone. This was embarrassing, but he didn't hate it either, which made it all the more embarrassing.

Willow tried to make conversation on the way to the healer's office and Hunter continued to be at a loss for words. How could he make the excuse that he had a concussion despite it being a leg injury? Titan, being a regular kid was hard.

- - -

Willow worrying over him and a brace later, Hunter was sitting in the principal's office next to Jax and waiting for one of his guardians to show up; Jax was doing the same. Principal Bump sat in front of them, hands on the table and fingers interlaced. He was looking between the two boys who were refusing to acknowledge each other, and after too long of stubborn silence he sighed.

"You two boys have got to stop fighting," He finally said.

Jax lifted his head quickly, glaring, "He started it!"

"No, I didn't! You tried to hit Willow!" Hunter snapped back, glaring at the other boy.

"But you punched me barely even a week ago!" He retorted sharply.

"Only because you mentioned my old life!" He came back just as quick.

"Both of you settle down!" Bump scolded them, shutting them both up effectively. Jax crossed his arms and turned his nose up and Hunter huffed and slumped into his seat. Bump sighed again, "Mr. Naylor, we're in here today because of what *you* did."

"Me?! But I—" He tried to jump and defend himself, but Bump was having none of it.

"You nearly broke Mr. Clawthorne's ankle today, did you not?" He pressed.

Jax frowned and pouted, slumping in his seat, "Yes sir. But I was just—"

"Just what?" Bump questioned him harshly, waiting for the next excuse that would do him no

good.

Jax avoided the principal's eyes and looked towards the bookshelf in the corner, "I was just trying to scare the captain, that's all…"

"And why would you do that?" He kept asking.

Jax just shrugged and didn't give a verbal response, and it made Bump pinch the bridge of his nose and sigh. *Kids these days…* The door to his office slammed open, nearly hitting the wall behind it and startling everyone in the room. Jax squeaked at the sound and Hunter jumped, and in came all three of his guardians. They all looked worried sick, and Darius was the first one to approach him.

"Hunter, what happened? Are you— Oh Titan, what happened to your leg?!" His voice went high with panic and Hunter tried to reassure not only him but the other two as well.

"It's just a fracture, don't worry. The healer fixed it up pretty well and she said I could take the brace off in two weeks," He explained calmly, but Darius was kneeling down to look at his leg anyway.

"And how did this happen? Did you fall again? Trip? Did somebody hurt you?" Darius had his hands on Hunter's arms now, squeezing and looking into his eyes.

Hunter smiled sheepishly and averted his eyes, looking at Jax, "Well…"

Darius, Eda, and Raine looked over to the other boy sitting in the chair next to Hunter, and at the sight of the three worried parents Jax shrunk into his seat and made sure he wasn't looking at them in any capacity. But Darius was already stomping over to him, "Did you do this to him?!"

"I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!" Jax tried to defend himself.

"Yeah right! You swung that staff around with enough force to break through solid metal!" Hunter snapped back at him.

Jax leaned over the arm of his chair and glared at the blonde, "Now you're just being dramatic!"

"And you're—" But Eda stepped between the boys and shut them both up; she gently pushed Darius back to keep him from getting too upset.

"Would one of you two just tell us what really happened? And be honest," She leveled Jax with a glare as harsh as Darius's and Jax swallowed nervously.

Everyone was silent, all of Hunter's parents' eyes on Jax and Hunter's own gaze focused on his feet, one wrapped up in a brace up to above his ankle. Jax squirmed uncomfortably, fingers squeezing the arms of his chair as he tried to find the words to say, "We were playing Flyer Derby and there was… *an altercation* between myself and the team captain."

"You started it…" Hunter muttered.

Jax tried to glare at him, but Eda and Darius were standing in his way, so he just continued, "I said some mean things to her, and she retaliated and… My temper got the best of me, and I was just trying to scare her, honest! But *he* jumped in the way, and I ended up… smashing his ankle…"

Silence. He kept his gaze on the floor, waiting for someone to yell at him. He was in a boat load of trouble. Darius sighed and crossed an arm over his chest, squeezing his eyes tightly shut and pinching the bridge of his nose, "So, let me get this straight. You threatened to hit another kid and

accidentally hit mine instead?"

Jax smiled nervously and nodded, a few dark strands of hair falling against his forehead, "Yeah, that's right! Exactly! So glad you understand!"

Darius leaned down to his level pretty fast, leaning a hand on the arm of the boy's chair and glaring at him, "No, I don't understand. Do you know what I don't understand? I'll elaborate. I don't understand why this is the second time in less than two weeks we've been called into this office because of an incident involving *you."*

Jax had leaned back in a panic, but he was still defending himself, "Hey, the first time he hit me!"

"Yes, because you dangled the trauma of a boy still very much in the healing process right over him to antagonize him. I don't think you understand now that that would make the first incident also *your fault,"* Darius snapped.

"Okay Darius, let's step back and cool down, okay?" Raine stepped in to deescalate the situation, their hands on Darius' arms and pulling him away from the boy.

Darius closed his eyes again and took a couple of deep breaths, and while Raine was distracted with calming him down, Hunter snickered at Jax's misfortune while the dark-haired boy glared daggers at the blonde. Eda would scold her kid, but… Well, Jax sort of had it coming. So, she let it be.

"Okay, I apologize for losing my temper," Darius said, but he didn't look directly at Jax, instead he focused on the principal still sitting behind his desk, "But you must understand that I'm worried because, as I mentioned, this is the second time we've all been here with an incident involving these two."

"Yes, I understand, Darius," Bump replied, hands still clasped and sitting on top of his desk, "These two most definitely have it out for each other, and I will be taking measures to make sure they will interact as little as possible in the future."

"Oh? Well, how are you going to do that?" Eda asked, crossing her arms.

"They have no classes together, so that's good already, but both of these incidents have taken place on the field during a sporting event," Bump told them, standing now and pressing his fingers to the surface in front of him, "Mr. Clawthorne here is injured so he won't be playing for at least two weeks, so I—"

"Wait, you're not going to take me off of the team are you, Principal Bump?" Hunter leaned forward in his seat, eyes wide with panic at the mere insinuation.

Bump held up a hand to dismiss that idea and shook his head, "Oh Titan, no. Playing on that team has been incredibly good for your morale, I wouldn't dream of making you quit. I was just stating a fact. What I was getting to was that there was a tryout today and other students had made the cut, all excluding one. You, Jax."

Jax pouted and crossed his arms, "The Captain doesn't know what she's thinking. I'll show her good next time."

"I'm afraid that won't be happening, actually," Bump waved off his idea.

Jax caught his eyes with his own surprised ones, "What? What do you mean by that?"

“I mean that you won’t be trying out again in any capacity,” He told him sternly, “You bullied the other students already on the team and you threatened to hurt the team captain today and ended up hurting another player anyway. As far as I’m concerned, you are banned from participating in any extracurricular sports in this school from this point on.”

“What?!” Jax jumped up, slamming his hands onto the desk, “B-But that’s not fair, Principal Bump! I’m good! I deserve to play!”

“Well, you should’ve thought of that before you decided to be a bully,” Bump simply shrugged, “You’ll have detention for two weeks after serving your weeklong suspension. You’re incredibly lucky Mr. Clawthorne’s parents here aren’t threatening to press charges.”

“That’s yet to be decided,” Darius threatened, only to get shoved gently by Raine.

“But—But—” Jax tried, but it was all for naught.

“You are dismissed, Mr. Naylor,” Bump waved him off.

“But my parents aren’t even here yet!” He kept on trying.

“Well then maybe they should practice being on time,” Bump retorted, “I have other things to attend to and Mr. Clawthorne needs to go home and rest. Thank you all for coming, I’m terribly sorry this happened.”

Hunter shrugged, “It’s okay, sir. I’ve had worse.”

It was a simple dismissal, but Bump really didn’t want to imagine the truth behind that statement coming from a boy his age. So, instead he smiled and nodded, “Well, get better soon, Hunter.”

Hunter smiled, “Thanks!”

Then he grabbed his crutches and stood up, stepping around the chair and joining his guardians. Jax continued to argue with Bump as they left, but they ignored him and exited the office. Once they were in the hallway and the door was shut behind them, Raine was grabbing Hunter’s face and looking him over.

“Oh goodness, are you okay? Is it just the ankle? You don’t have any other injuries you’re hiding from us, do you?” They asked with a tone laced in fright as they tilted his head to check for marks.

“‘M fine, Raine,” He stumbled out, his words clipped because of Raine squishing his cheeks.

“Raine, stop it, you’re smothering the boy,” Darius grabbed their shoulder and pulled them away from Hunter, only to replace them by setting his hands on his shoulders and kneeling to his height, “But you are okay, right? Does it hurt?”

Hunter shoved Darius away gently and smacked away his hands, “I’m fine, would all of you calm down? It’s just a fractured ankle, the healer said it would only take a couple of weeks for me to walk again since she healed most of the damage already.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Eda sighed, “Good to see you in good spirits, kid.”

Hunter shrugged, “I was having fun today. I just gotta go find my friends and let them know I’m fine. I got in trouble for worrying them last time.”

Raine chuckled, “You’ve got some good friends, Hunter.”

Hunter had to smile at that, “Yeah, I know. They’re probably waiting for me outside, let’s just go so Luz can give me a stupid hug and we can go home.”

He walked ahead of them, and the others all shared a look and rolled their eyes. He was acting as if he didn’t enjoy hugs when they very much knew that to be complete bullshit. They didn’t mention it to him anyway and just followed him to the exit. They didn’t have to walk too far from Principal Bump’s office to get there, and once they reached the doors they headed outside and low and behold, there were Hunter’s friends.

Hunter was gunna head down the steps, but it was a pain and it’d be easier and less awkward to just go ahead and do all the friend stuff up here at the top. Just like he predicted, Luz came rushing over from the railing and hugged him, but not as harshly as usual because of his injured leg, “Thank God, you’re okay! We were so worried!”

“Luz, you were with me in the healer's office,” Hunter reminded her, “You heard her say that my ankle was fine.”

Luz pulled away and gave him a playfully irritated look, setting her hands on her hips, “Can’t a girl be worried for her brother?”

Hunter rolled his eyes and there was Willow, “Hunter, I’m so sorry this happened.”

He was confused, “Why are you apologizing? It’s not your fault.”

“He meant to hit me, not you,” Willow looked so sad, her hands clasped in front of her chest and fingers fidgeting nervously, “I should’ve handled it.”

“You think I’d feel better if you had gotten hurt?” He asked her in disbelief, and then he scoffed and placed a hand on his hip, “Willow, I’m not even beat up about this. In fact, I’m happier here with a broken ankle than I would’ve been if it would’ve been you.”

She really didn’t know if she should be flattered or not. She was happy he was happy that she was okay, but she also wasn’t happy with how… okay he was with being hurt like this. He already told her he’s been through worse, but obviously that didn’t help either.

“Well… I won’t let you get hurt again if I have anything to say about it,” Willow told him, “You saved my butt, so it’s only right that I return the favor.”

“Haven’t you already saved me from death multiple times?” Hunter reminded her, smiling sweetly.

She smiled in return, “Well, yeah, but you get what I’m saying.”

He chuckled, “Fine. We watch each other’s backs. Deal?”

He held out his hand, something he didn’t offer often, so it made her smile big when she reached forward and took it with her own, “Deal.”

Luz lifted a fist and coughed into it, speaking through the sound to cover her words, *“Losers.”*

Hunter and Willow both glared at her, and she just shrugged and looked away, acting oblivious. Hunter resisted the urge to roll his eyes yet again, but Willow did not, and while she was in the act of doing that, Hunter looked around and furrowed his eyebrows, “Where’s Gus?”

Willow opened her mouth to answer him, but just as she was about to, right on cue Gus slammed out of the front doors of Hexide and startled everyone standing nearby. He was out of breath, and

he bent over at the waist and set his hands on his knees. Willow approached him somewhat, “Gus? What’s wrong?”

He waved a hand around and shook his head, catching his breath, “N-Nothings wrong, I just need… A big favor from you guys.”

They all shared a look and shrugged before looking back to him, “Okay, sure. What’s the favor?”

“I need—” He stopped himself when he saw Hunter and he smiled, “Hey, you’re okay! How’d it go in Bump’s office?”

“Fine. Jax got suspended for a week and also got detention for two,” He replied nonchalantly.

“He did?! Cool,” Viney smirked and high-fived Skara.

“Deserved,” Amity crossed her arms as Luz leaned an arm on her shoulder.

“What did you need?” Hunter asked his best friend, eyebrows pulled together in concern.

Gus shook his head, “Right. So, it’s nothing major but it’s pretty big to me, so I need you guys to not laugh at me, okay?”

“Sure dude, what’s the problem?” Luz asked.

“Okay, so, um… Matty kind of invited me to a sleepover and he told me I could bring you guys so please, *please* don’t back out on me,” He pressed his palms together and pleaded with them, sounding very desperate.

Willow chuckled a little, “And why do you need us to come? Isn’t alone time with Matt what you wanted?”

“Yes! Well, no! Yes and no!” He groaned and threw his head back before sending them all the most desperate and pleading look they’ve ever seen, “Please, just help me out! It’ll be fun anyway! Don’t bail on me, I’m begging you!”

“Okay, okay, relax! We won’t bail on you,” Luz laughed.

“Yeah, we got your back,” Hunter patted him on the shoulder.

Gus sighed in relief, smiling softly, “Thanks, guys.”

“No problemo!” Luz beamed, “When is the sleepover? I gotta make sure to tell my Mom.”

“Next Saturday. Are you gunna be okay to go, Hunter?” He asked, eyeing Hunter’s leg brace cautiously.

Hunter nodded in response, “Yep! I can get back to walking in just two weeks, this is nothing. I’ll be there.”

“Great!” Gus smiled again, “You guys are the best!”

Gus hopped down the steps, ready to go home along with the rest of his friends, and with assistance Hunter got down the steps too. He had failed to ask what a sleepover even was, but he briefly remembers Luz talking about it before, and Willow too. He was tired though and didn’t feel like having that conversation tonight, so he’d just ask later or find out when he showed up.

Either way, this would be his first sleepover and he had a feeling it would be an interesting one.

Chapter End Notes

thank u so much for reading!! the final two chapters are my favorites in the whole fic, so im so excited to share them with you all. the next chapter will be up on tuesday, and the final one will be uploaded on thursday. thanks for supporting me through this so far, you guys are the best!! leave a review if you'd like, and until tuesday, have a good day/night!!

Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

The Hexsquad attends Matt's sleepover. Feelings are revealed.

Chapter Notes

im back hello!! waiting for the premiere on saturday has made this week feel so long, and it feels like i haven't updated this fic in a century. im so excited for the episode this weekend, it's killing me 😭but i digress!! this chapter is one im very proud of!! it's very cute and sweet and im so excited for you guys to read it, so plz read ahead and enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hunter flicked his cowlick out of his face for about the tenth time in the past five minutes. It was so unruly and irritating, and he hated it a whole lot, but every time he thought about opting for a new haircut and getting rid of the damned thing again Luz was there to tell him *'no it's cute, don't cut it out'* and also Darius told him if he cut it off it would just make his hair look weird, so he left it alone despite how irritating it was.

"Would you leave it alone already?" Luz scolded him lightheartedly, "Your hair looks fine."

He grimaced at her words, not able to agree, "It looks weird, what are you even saying? It's longer again and harder to keep a professional appearance."

Luz rolled her eyes, "And pray tell the reason you need to keep a professional appearance for? Are you not just a high schooler?"

Hunter shrugged and shot her a look, "A high schooler who wants to look professional."

"For who, Hunter?" Luz threw her head back, suppressing a groan.

"Dress to impress, human," Hunter brushed the imaginary dust off of his chest, sticking his nose up snobbishly like he used to do all the time.

Luz had to giggle at his demeanor, "Look at you being all snooty and smug. I missed this side of you."

Hunter dropped his arm back to his side, ears and cheeks dusted with pink as he scratched at his ear, "Well, I didn't go anywhere."

"You're just really good at hiding," Luz teased, leaning over to nudge him with her arm, "I'm glad you're coming out again. You seem happier lately."

He shrugged, smiling a bit sheepishly, "I'm trying to be."

“Well, I’m proud of you,” She interlocked her arm with his, smiling up at him with glee.

He smiled back, “I’m trying to be proud too.”

That just made her smile bigger. Knowing how he was with emotional stuff like this, she reached up and flicked his cowlick to tease him again, “How about you be proud of this bad boy?”

He shooed her hand away and grimaced again, “Euck, no. It’s annoying and looks stupid.”

Luz made a face at him, looking at him as if he were being a bit too dramatic, which he was, “Since when do you care about having a weird strand of hair or a tooth gap?”

Hunter lifted a hand to cover his mouth and hide his teeth as he spoke, “Is it that noticeable?”

Luz stopped in her tracks and when she did her arm wrapped around his made him stop too. She spun him around to look at her and she tilted her head, giving him an incredulous look, “Alright, what’s wrong? You’re acting weirder than normal and that’s saying something.”

Hunter shrugged and avoided looking her in the eyes, “Nothing’s wrong. I’m perfectly fine.”

Luz raised an eyebrow, “Yeah, and I’m the President of The United States. Come on, Hunter, spill it.”

“You know what? You should be President. You’d be a great leader and the kids would look up to you,” He smiled and swung an arm around, trying to distract her from the topic. It was too bad he sucked at it.

“Hunter,” She pressed.

He frowned and sighed, “Fine. You know, having a family isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, all you guys ever do is ask me how I’m doing and I’m sick of it.”

“Dude, quit stalling,” She motioned with a hand for him to get on with it.

Hunter pouted and slumped his shoulders, looking at his shoes, “Okay, okay… I guess with all of the lack of worry of being the Golden Guard and my trauma being treated properly, I have more time to have *‘regular kid problems.’”*

Luz understood that, “So… what you’re telling me here is that you’re self-conscious?”

He shrugged, “Yes?”

Luz frowned, “Well, you have no need to be.”

“Uh, yes. I do,” He looked at her like she was some kind of idiot, and then he motioned to himself, “Have you seen me? I look like I should be admitted to a hospital.”

Luz rolled her eyes, “You’re being dramatic.”

“Am I, Luz?” His voice rose with agitation.

“Yes, Hunter, you are,” She set her hands on his shoulders, “Listen, you look great. You’re just critical of yourself because, well, that’s just how it is being a hormonal teenager.”

“I don’t even have a regular body, I’m a manufactured clone made of an assortment of human bones and demon scales. Be real, Luz,” Hunter tried to get it through to her, but she was dead set

on calling him dramatic.

“I think I know what this is about,” She nodded as it clicked in her brain, “You started getting a little squirrely after you started at Hexide, or squirrelier than usual, anyway. This is about a girl.”

Hunter laughed nervously, “Ha! What? No, there’s no girl. I’m just being myself! A little neurotic and strange and all of my other horrible qualities!”

Luz shook her head and patted his shoulder, getting quite a serious look on her face, “No, no. Well, yes, you are strange, but you’re also in love.”

“In love?! Hehe, yeah right! I just recently found out what that word even means!” He was not very good at diverting a conversation topic.

“Nope. If you can love Flapjack, then you can love a girl,” Luz told him, “And you, my friend, love a girl.”

He kept on chuckling nervously, “Don’t be ridiculous, Luz—”

“It’s Willow isn’t it?” She cut him off.

He frowned and bowed his head, “Yes…”

She already knew this, and he knew she knew this, and yet he continued to dance around his feelings for their friend for… some reason. He wasn’t actually sure why.

“Well, we’re going to see her tonight! And sleepovers are so relaxed, so this would be a perfect time for you to tell her how you feel!” Luz suggested, putting a smile on her face again in hopes of making him feel a little more confident.

“What?! Are you insane?!” He looked at her as if she was, “I can’t tell her anything like that! What if she thinks I’m weird? She probably doesn’t like me like that. I’ve got these circles under my eyes and this stupid tooth gap and I’m much too temperamental for her. No, no, she deserves someone who’s cool and happy and not a total freak!”

Okay, maybe he did know why.

“Whoa,” Luz was taken aback by that, “Slow down, buddy. You’re not a freak—”

“I am a freak, Luz!” He grabbed her arms and shook her, and she had to grab ahold of his arms to brace herself so she didn’t stumble and fall, “Have you met me?!”

“Yes, and you gave me the same impression every time,” She tried to calm him, gripping his arms to hold him still and make him stop shaking her, “I always thought you were a good person.”

He pointed a finger in her face and scolded her, “We’re not getting into that right now. I’m talking about being weird and unnatural.”

“You’re not unnatural—”

“I am unnatural! I’m not a witch, or a human, or even a demon! I’m a weird hybrid of all three and at the same time none of those things at all!” Hunter shook her again to enunciate his point, “I can stick my hands in boiling water, and nothing happens, Luz! That’s weird!”

“Okay? Is that supposed to make people not like you?” Luz asked him, “I can’t digest most things in this realm, my ears are round, and I can’t do magic naturally and no one bats an eye at me,” She

said, but then retracted that, “Well, some people do, but those people aren’t worth it. All of our friends love you for you. Human, witch, demon, grimwalker, whatever you may be.”

“But— But—” He tried to retort, but she grabbed his face in her hands gently and reassured him.

“You’re wonderful, Hunter. Any girl would have to be insane not to enjoy your company,” She smiled sweetly.

He narrowed his eyes at her, “Willow isn’t insane.”

Luz’s smile widened, “My point exactly.”

He blushed again, ears flicking nervously, and it made Luz giggle. She let go of his face and stepped back to give him space when he released her arms. He instead held his hands in front of him, interlocking his fingers; they were twitching nervously, “I’m scared.”

Luz softened her expression but was still smiling fondly, “Why are you scared, Hunter?”

“I-I’ve never felt this way about someone before. What if she doesn’t like me back?” He muttered, his diffidence starting to get the best of him.

Luz didn’t want to talk over him or make little of his concerns, so she’d hear him out before giving him her opinion, “Why wouldn’t she like you back?”

He shrugged again, “Well, she’s so cool and strong and she always knows what to do and how to make people smile, and I’m just… well, *me.”*

“And why is being you a problem?” She asked him, crossing her arms over her midsection.

“Did you not just hear what I said over and over again?” He deadpanned.

She held up her hands, “Alright, alright. I think you need to relax though.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” He said.

She reached forward and gently grabbed his wrists, pulling his hands apart from each other and holding his arms carefully in her own hands, “Hunter, please listen to me. You are one of the best people I know, you’re going to be fine. I promise you’re better than you give yourself credit for.”

He rolled his eyes, but not in annoyance more in a dismissive way, “I’m really no—”

“Don’t you even finish that sentence,” She stopped him, squeezing his arms just a little, “You’re perfect. You’ll see.”

He frowned but she looked dead serious about this. He sighed, “Alright… But I—”

“And you’re adorable, you’ve got a lot going for you,” She cut him short again, releasing his hands and grabbing his face once again. She pulled him down a little so she could reach him and pressed a kiss to the small but noticeable scar on his forehead, “Now let’s quit mopin’ and get goin’!”

She grabbed his wrist again and turned, dragging him along behind her the rest of the way to Mattholomule’s house. Hunter didn’t protest, only smiled softly at her words and actions, following her with ease.

They were the last ones to arrive at Matt's sleepover, and they became aware of this a few moments after stepping onto Matt's porch and knocking on the door. Footsteps were heavy and quick on the other side, and when the door was flung open perhaps a little too fast, Gus was revealed to be standing on the other side.

"What took you guys so long?" He whispered harshly.

"Good to see you too, Gus," Luz said sarcastically with a tight grin.

"Oh, you're the first one here. What a surprise," Hunter said, laying the sarcasm on thick.

"For your information, you two are the last ones to arrive," Gus corrected him.

"Okay, but you were the first one here, weren't you?" Hunter asked.

Gus was silent for a moment, looking at Hunter dead in the eyes and then he rushed out, "That's not important. What's important here is that you two are *late."*

"Right, sorry, sorry. Hunter here had a bit of a moment on the way here, so we got held up," Luz informed him with a more genuine smile this time.

"Oh no, are you okay, Hunter?" Willow's voice piped up as she suddenly appeared next to Gus.

Hunter's face flushed, as the moment he'd gone through in question just so happened to be because of her, "O-Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Just got a little nervous. I've never been to a sleepover before."

She smiled softly, relaxing against the open door, "Oh, I understand. They're pretty chill though, it's just a bunch of us hanging out and playing games. Watching movies, telling secrets, all that fun stuff!"

Luz elbowed Hunter and wiggled her eyebrows, "You hear that, Hunter? Telling *secrets."*

Hunter glared at her before speaking again, "That sounds… *fun!* I can't wait!"

"That's great to hear! Why don't you guys come on in? we're all watching a movie in the living room," She suggested, stepping out of the way with Gus so their friends could enter.

They both stepped inside, and Luz smiled at Willow as she closed the door behind them, "Thanks Willow, we'll be there in a second. We're a bit thirsty from the walk here, so we're gunna go get a drink."

"Alright, we'll be waiting," Willow wiggled her fingers at them and then returned to the living room with the others.

Luz grabbed Gus as soon as Willow's back was turned and dragged him into the kitchen alongside Hunter. They parked it in front of the fridge, and Luz had her hands on Gus' shoulders, "So? How's it going with Matt?"

Gus' eyes widened, "What do you mean *'how's it going?'* it's a disaster! Willow and Amity are not subtle at all!"

"Amity never is, but I've got a feeling Willow is doing this on purpose," Luz thought out loud.

"Duh! You guys gotta help me out!" He begged them.

"Dude, what if you just ask him out? What's the harm in that? He likes you, you like him. Just get

it over with," Luz suggested with a shrug.

"You act like it's that easy! Shouldn't I ask him in a more romantic setting? Maybe I should get him flowers?" Gus rattled on.

"Oh, I know how to make flowers. I've been practicing my plant magic glyphs," Hunter tried to offer help.

Luz smiled sweetly, "Aww, you've been practicing plant magic? Are you trying to impress Willow?"

"Shut up, no! I just like learning about magic, you know this!" Hunter shut her up with a glare.

She stuck her tongue out at him, "Party-pooper."

"Maybe tonight wasn't the night to do this," Gus was spiraling right before them, head in his hands as he began to panic.

"Whoa Gus, calm down. Breathe," Luz quelled his high emotions, "Tonight is as good a night as any. You can do this."

Hunter raised an eyebrow and a hand, confused, "I have a question. Is there any particular reason you're rushing this? Not that you have been anyway, but that's why it's weird. Why the rush all of the sudden?"

Gus and Luz shared a look, and then looked back to Hunter; Gus spoke, "Grom is coming up, didn't you know?"

"Grom?" Hunter had never even heard the word, "What's that?"

"It's technically a stupid night where one student from Hexide is picked to fight Grometheus, this big nightmare demon that lives under Hexide," Gus informed him, "But to most of us it's a dance, and it could be the most romantic night of some of our lives. Last year we all went as friends, but this year is different. Luz and Amity have each other, and if I'm lucky, this year I'll be with Matt."

"Oh," Hunter said, thinking this over, "Well… That seems nerve wracking."

"It is!" Gus threw his arms out, panicking again.

And to both of their horror, they could practically see the lightbulb light up over Luz's head, "Oh my gosh, you two should make a bro pact!"

Both boys looked at her in confusion, Hunter speaking up about it, "A bro pact?"

"What are you talking about, Luz?" Gus asked her, though he was afraid he was about to regret asking.

"Well, you want to go to Grom with Matt, right? Well Hunter here wants to go with Willow," Luz said with a big and beaming smile.

"I literally just found out what Grom is thirty seconds ago," Hunter defended his own stance that Luz had just spoken into existence.

"Okay, but you've been wanting to ask out Willow, and Gus you've been wanting to ask out Matt, right? So why not make a pact that you'll both do it tonight? It's motivation!" Luz cheered happily.

Gus and Hunter looked at her as they thought it over, and then they looked at each other. They both shook their heads and Gus spoke next, “I don’t know, Luz. We’re both really nervous, and I’m not so sure we’d want to ask them out in front of other people.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t it be more *‘romantic,’”* Hunter put the word in finger quotes, “to ask them when we’re alone?”

“Who says you have to ask them while we’re all together? You can always ask them to go outside for some air or to stargaze or whatever. That’s pretty romantic, huh?” She was grinning from ear to ear; she was much too excited about this.

“Ahem,” Someone behind them cleared their throat, their voice noticeably deeper than everyone else’s here. They all turned around to face them, finding Steve standing by the counter near the oven and smiling at them, “Hi, how are you guys?”

Gus and Hunter’s faces both flushed, and Gus laughed nervously, “Haha! Steve! Great to see you! I totally forgot you were in here!”

“So I’ve noticed,” He smiled tightly, his hands gripping the counter behind him as he leaned back on it.

“Steve? What are you doing here?” Hunter asked, surprised to see him. He knew he was Matt’s brother, but he was expecting him to have his own place somewhere.

“Oh, I’m just shacking up here with my folks until I can find a place to stay,” He answered his question, then he reached for the tray on the stovetop and grabbed one of the fresh snacks placed there, “Cookie?”

“Oh, thanks,” Hunter took the treat from the man and bit into it; it tasted good, but something was off about it, “Little dry.”

Steve snapped his fingers, “Damn. Too much flour again.”

“You like to bake?” Luz asked, honestly surprised.

“Yeah! I’m not very good at it, but it’s fun to do anyway,” He shrugged, and then he addressed one of the boy’s again, “So Gus, you want to go to Grom with my little brother, huh?”

Gus swallowed nervously but he nodded, “Y-Yes sir.”

Steve chuckled, trying to ease the kid’s stress, “Calm down, I’m not gunna go all protective big brother mode on you if that’s what you think of me. Matty can handle himself and I trust you.”

“Y-You do?” He was nervous but curious.

“Yeah!” Steve laughed, “You’re a good guy, and smart too. Way more level-headed than Matty, he could use a guy like you in his life. Maybe you can help him to mellow out, he’s so high-strung.”

Gus smiled and relaxed a little at his words, thinking of the boy in the living room with his other friends, “Yeah, but I kinda like that about him.”

The other three in the room all shared a look when they saw the lovey-dovey expression on Gus’ face, smiling knowingly but also mischievously. Luz cleared her throat, “Steve, may we all have some water? I think we need to get in there with our friends before they come looking for us.”

“Oh yeah, sure,” Steve turned towards the cabinet and grabbed three cups out of it, filling them up in the sink before handing them to the three teenagers, “Have fun, don’t burn anything down, you know the rules.”

“But arson can be so fun, Stephanie,” Luz faked being disappointed.

Steve laughed at her nickname for him, “Well, just don’t burn yourself then.”

“Wow,” Luz smiled as she turned away with Gus to go into the living room, shouting across the house, “Matt, your brother is the best!”

Hunter pressed his palms and fingers against the coolness of the glass in his hands, calling over his shoulder to his friends, “I’ll be there in a second, I just… need to ask Steve something.”

They didn’t pay it much mind and just went on their way to join their friends. Steve looked at Hunter curiously, tilting his head a little and furrowing his eyebrows, “What’s up, man?”

Hunter looked over his shoulder to make sure his friends had left and gone out of earshot, and then he stepped forward and set his cup of water down before setting a hand on the countertop and leaning towards Steve, lowering his voice, “Steve, I need your help.”

Steve looked sort of nervous but rolled with it, “Okay, what seems to be the problem?”

“Okay, well um, this might be sort of weird to ask you all of the sudden, but I like to think that you and I always got along pretty well in the Emperor’s Coven, so…” He trailed off.

Steve nodded and shrugged, “Yeah, sure. Spill the beans.”

“Okay, so here’s the deal,” Hunter stood up straighter and pressed his hands together, keeping his voice low, “You’re a handsome guy, and you’re pretty charming, so I’m assuming you can help me. How do I, meaning me, Hunter, hi, ask a girl… out… on… a date?”

Steve seemed surprised by the question, and Hunter was obviously embarrassed by it. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights, eyes wide and ears folded downwards, tinted red along with the entirety of his face. It took Steve a minute to comprehend what had just been asked of him, but when it computed he leaned his hand on the counter and relaxed, “Oh, you want to ask out the derby captain.”

Hunter didn’t speak, but he did nod and let out a sound that resembled a squeak. Steve laughed, “Relax man, I’m not going to make fun of you.”

“Really?” He asked in a high-pitched tone, “Sorry, I’m just… nervous. My stomach’s been all twisty and my face is always hot and every time I see her I feel like I’m going to die!”

Steve laughed even harder, “Oh man, you’ve got it bad!”

“Got what bad?” Hunter asked, concerned.

“I think this qualifies as more than a crush. You’re in love,” He said to him with nothing but confidence.

Hunter’s shoulders fell and he mumbled to himself, “Yeah, that’s what Luz said too…”

“Well, don’t you worry. This calls for an appointment at the healer’s office of love and the doctor is in,” Steve was maybe a little too confident in his abilities, but then again Steve has never let him

down before, so Hunter would trust him with this; he did come to him on his own volition after all. Steve did have to wonder though, “Why are you asking me though? Why not your friends or your parents?”

“Because my friends hate me,” Hunter told him, thinking about how his friends were constantly teasing him for his crush or whatever it was on Willow, “And Eda’s methods would be much too intense for someone like me, and Darius doesn’t really date girls.”

“Okay, but girls aren’t like some different species or anything they’re just people,” Steve shrugged, way too nonchalant about all of this for Hunter’s liking.

“Yes, I know that, but trust me, Darius wouldn’t know where to begin,” Hunter tried to tell him, “I think he had a crush on Alador Blight when he was younger.”

Steve grimaced, “How would you know that?”

“I read his diary. That’s aside from the point, Steve! Just help me out!” Hunter was pleading now.

“Where does Whispers fit into all of this?” He asked anyway.

“They’re too romantic and I’m not capable of being that in touch with my feelings! Can we please move on?” He was getting irritated, and Steve had to suppress a smile from the amusement he was taking from this.

“Alright, fine. So, you want to charm a girl,” Steve confirmed, relaxing against the counter and beginning to think this through, but Hunter was intent on talking.

“Not just any girl, we’re talking about Willow Park. She’s the coolest girl in the entire universe and every realm, so this has to be perfect,” He had to make sure he understood what was at stake here.

Steve smirked, “I don’t know, dude, why don’t you just tell her that? That was pretty smooth of you.”

“Don’t you have to impress people when you’re trying to get them to like you?” His eyebrows pulled together to form a confused expression.

“I’m pretty sure she already likes you, man,” Steve tried to tell him.

“And how would you know?” Hunter challenged, not believing him.

Steve wanted to roll his eyes, but he didn’t, “Well, she went on and on about you before they put the movie in.”

Hunter was a bit taken aback by that information, “Wait, really? She was? W-What was she saying?”

Steve shrugged a shoulder and thought back, “I don’t know, she was telling me and Matt about how you hurt your leg last week, which I see is doing better by the way.”

Hunter looked down at his leg, “Oh, the brace was too tight and uncomfortable, so I took it off.”

“That’s just like you,” Steve shook his head though his smile was fond, “Anyway, she was telling us about how good you are on the team and then she got all embarrassed when she rattled on about being proud of how far you’ve come or something?”

Yeah, he can see why that would be embarrassing, he was feeling that way now, “O-Oh, well

that's nice to hear."

Steve grinned, "I don't think I can give you any advice aside from telling you to be yourself. That seems to work out pretty well for ya."

He used to not believe that. He used to think being himself is the reason not a single person ever wanted to be around him, but he's been learning and figuring out that Belos' influence had warped his mind into believing in stuff like that. He was trying really hard to believe that people did like him for himself.

His hands came together again in front of him and once again he made sure to avoid eye contact as he always did when he was especially nervous, "Do you really believe that?"

Steve carefully reached out and set a hand on Hunter's shoulder, smiling even though Hunter did flinch a little, "Yeah, I do."

Hunter didn't move to get away from Steve's hold on his shoulder, just stood there and tried to convince himself that what he was being told was all true. In the end he sighed, "That's what Gus told me too."

"Well, your second opinion agrees so I'd stick with it," He squeezed his shoulder.

Hunter was able to smile, "Yeah, okay. Thanks, Steve."

"No problem, man," He patted his shoulder, "And hey, about what I said at Hexide at the beginning of the semester, I didn't mean to upset you with my mention of your position in the Emperor's Coven. I was trying to lighten the tension with it being your first day and all that, but I think it had the opposite effect. I'm sorry if I upset you."

Hunter was surprised he even remembered that, or that he actually noticed that he'd tensed, and that his demeanor shifted at the mention of it, "Oh, no, it's okay. I had a lot going on at the time, it's not your fault. I barely even remembered that."

"Well, still," He apologized anyway, "I'm sorry. Me and you are both different people now, we're able to be ourselves. The past is the past, we should focus on the now, right?"

Hunter finally met his eyes again and he smiled a little when he did, "Right. Thanks for the apology."

"Hey, thanks for fighting back," Steve replied.

Hunter didn't get it, "Fighting back? Against what?"

"Everything you've been through. I was always rooting for you, I'm glad you made it to the other side," Steve's fingers curled a little tighter around Hunter's shoulder, as if he needed the support just as much as Hunter did.

Hunter had to fight at his emotions yet again, "I'm glad you made it out too."

Steve chuckled a little and then he leaned forward, and to Hunter's surprise, he pulled him into a hug. Him and Steve were never incredibly close, but they had some missions together and when Hunter was a younger scout, he can recall Steve looking out for him and making sure he was safe. Hunter wasn't even a teenager at the time, just a little kid, so it was understandable why Steve was so protective, but then again, he'd been the only one who had even cared. Hunter had a lot to thank Steve for, and he wanted to thank him every time he saw him, but right now this hug would suffice.

Steve pulled away and ruffled Hunter's hair, making Hunter groan and try and fix his cowlick again. Steve grabbed the cup from the counter and handed it back to the blonde, nudging him in the right direction, "Now get out there and ask that girl to Grom."

Hunter usually would've been embarrassed and annoyed at someone saying something like that to him, but this time he just smiled when he glanced over his shoulder at his old friend, "On it!"

And then he walked away and went to join his friends, leaving Steve alone in the kitchen to bake another batch of cookies. He had hope that this time he'd put in just the right amount of flour.

- - -

"Okay, truth or dare… Amity!" Luz pointed to her girlfriend sitting across the circle they'd all formed on the floor.

"Hmmm, I pick…" Amity tapped her chin as she thought it through, and then she smiled and chirped, "Dare!"

Luz squealed excitedly and clapped her hands, "Great! I dare you to… kiss me!"

"Oh, that one is so hard, how will I ever cope," Amity said dramatically before she leaned across the circle and kissed her girlfriend.

"Barf," Hunter gagged, and when Luz pulled away from Amity she shoved him.

"He's right, you two are grossly in love," Matt crossed his arms and butt in, shaking his head in disapproval.

"Shut up, Matty. You're just jealous you don't have someone to kiss," Amity flicked her fingers as if to shoo him.

"Good! If having a boyfriend means I have to subject my friends to that, then I'm fine with it!" He was stubborn, as always.

"What friends?" Gus teased, laughing when he earned a shove from the boy.

"Shut up. Who's next?" Matt snapped.

"That would be me," Amity raised her hand, "Let's see here… Truth or dare… Matty."

"Oh, um," He was surprised she picked him, and it took him a second to think of an answer, "Uhh… truth?"

"Alright, is it true you're not actually against the idea of being in a romantic relationship?" Amity asked him.

Matt was stumped for a moment, not expecting someone to ask him a question like this, but then again these were Gus' friends, "Uhh…"

Luz held up her hands to ease his worries, "Totally cool if you aren't. Aunt Lilith doesn't want a romantic relationship in her life."

"No, no that's not it," Matt shook his head, "I'm… not against the idea. I just… I don't know… No, I'm not against the idea."

Everyone aside from Matt and Gus shared a look, pleased with that answer. Amity gestured for him

to continue the game, “Alright then. Proceed. It is your turn.”

“Thank Titan…” He breathed, “Okay, true or dare Luz.”

“Dare!” She leaned forward on her knees eagerly, her grin showing excitement.

“Okay, I dare you to…” He leaned to the side and reached under the coffee table, picking something off the ground, “Eat this glopcorn kettle that’s been under the table for the past month.”

“Did you know it was there?” Amity asked.

“Why didn’t you clean it up?” Willow asked a follow up question.

“For this precise moment, ladies,” He grinned mischievously, “Well Luz? I understand if you want to back out, it is kind of—”

Luz took the kernel from his hand and popped it into her mouth, chewing it at a regular pace and swallowing it, “Okay, my turn!”

Everyone was looking at her with a mix of awe and disgust, except for Gus who just had awe written on his face. Amity too, actually. Luz tapped her fingers against her knees and looked around the circle, “Let’s see… Eeny meeny miney… Gus! Truth or dare?”

“Dare!” He nearly shouted with excitement.

Luz grinned that impish smile of hers again and giggled, “Oh, this will be fun. I dare you to tell us a secret.”

His eyes widened in surprise and his smile fell. He knew exactly what secret she was speaking of. He could very easily tell them all a minor secret, like about how he got stuck upside down in the janitor’s closet for three hours last week, but he’d been building up courage all night for this and Grom was only weeks away. He curled his fingers against his legs, anxiously tugging on his pajama pant legs and he released a deep breath.

“Okay. You guys want to know my big secret?” His heart was beating so fast in his chest, but he was trying to keep up this courage. He could do this.

“Yes. Yes, we really do,” Luz leaned her elbows on her legs and propped her chin in her palms, waiting for the big reveal.

“Okay…” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *You can do this, Gus.* This was the most nervous he’s ever been, and he’s nearly died multiple times. He took another deep breath and then finally when he opened his eyes, he turned to the boy sitting to his right, “Matt.”

Matt startled, catching Gus’ eyes, “Y-Yes?”

Gus took yet another deep breath and then he lifted his arms and set his hands on Matt’s shoulders. The other boy stilled under his hold, and suppressed a squeak, but he didn’t say a word. He let Gus talk, and Gus found it within him to spit it out, “I… I’ve liked you for a long time now, like *really* liked you and I was always too scared to ask you out cuz I thought you hated me but then you invited me to things and then here so now I guess I know you like me too but I don’t know if you like me, like me, so— What I’m trying to ask here is: would you like to go to Grom with me?”

He said all of that incredibly fast and yet none of it got jumbled, but it sure did throw Matt for a loop. He blinked, dumbfounded by what he’d just heard. He honestly couldn’t believe it. He

opened his mouth to reply, then closed it, then opened it again. He was looking like a seabeast out of water. And then, finally, “Yes.”

His entire face was red, and now it was Gus’ turn to look dumbfounded, “W-Wait, yes as in *‘yes Gus, I will go to Grom with you’?”*

Matt smiled nervously, “What else would it mean?”

And now Gus was smiling, throwing his arms out and breathing an exhale of relief, “Oh, thank Titan! I was so nervous but now I’m overcome with happiness!”

Matt smiled bigger, less anxious, “R-Really? You’re that happy to go with me?”

“Of course, I am! I’ve been working up the nerve to ask you on a date for a year!” Gus admitted, and it made Matt laugh.

“No way! Me too!” He giggled.

Gus felt like he could cry, he was so happy, and so he threw himself into a hug with Matt, a weight having been lifted from his shoulders. Everyone in the group aside from them let out a joyful, *“Awwww.”*

Gus rolled his eyes when he pulled back from Matt, sitting cross-legged again to face his friends, “There. You got your wish.”

He was looking at Luz when he said it, but he was directing it to all of them. Luz was beaming, “I’m so happy you two are finally together! Now me and Amity aren’t the only couple in our friend group!”

“Now there’s only two single losers!” Matt laughed and pointed at Willow and Hunter, who only glared in return.

“Well then maybe they should just get together so we can be complete?” Amity suggested nonchalantly with a shrug.

Both Willow and Hunter blushed, and Willow cleared her throat loudly, “Gus! It’s your turn!”

Gus shrugged, “Okay. Willow, truth or dare?”

“Truth?” She hoped he wouldn’t ask her anything invasive.

“Do you have a crush on anyone currently?” She really should’ve known better.

She made a noise of panic and diverted, “Nevermind, I choose dare!”

“Fine by me. I dare you to hold the hand of the person to your right,” He was smiling so smugly it made Willow want to narrow her eyes at him, but she was too nervous to do anything of the sort right now.

She looked to her right, making eye contact with Hunter, and then she looked to his hand, “Uh-um, sorry. Is it okay if I—”

He nodded maybe a little too eagerly, “Yeah, it’s fine.”

“Great,” Great? She wanted to slap herself. She reached over and set her hand on top of Hunter’s, curling her fingers around his palm and squeezing his hand gently. She felt so awkward right now

and yet holding his hand felt right. Gus was giving her that stupid look again; he was enjoying this too much. Karma for all the teasing towards him, even if she had been taking part the least.

“Truth or dare, Gus,” This was the only payback she could get right now.

“Dare,” He replied quickly.

“Hold Matt’s hand,” She challenged.

“Ha! Easy!” He reached over and snatched up Matt’s hand, making the other boy blush, “Truth or dare, Willow!”

“Oh my Titan, okay,” Amity held up her hands to quell the situation, “No more truth or dare’s involving relationships with others, how’s that sound?”

“Yes please,” Willow and Matt both said at the same time, their voices both higher pitched than normal.

“Ugh, fine,” Gus pouted and rolled his eyes, propping his chin in his free hand, “Take your pick, Willow.”

“Truth,” She answered.

“Alright, let’s see…” He thought for a moment, trying to come up with a good question, and then an idea popped into his head and his pout disappeared, “Ooh, okay! What is your biggest fear?”

“Oh, hmm…” She had to think about this one, “I don’t know… I’m scared of a lot of things.”

Hunter was surprised by that, “What? No way. You Willow?”

She giggled, “Yes Hunter, me. I’m scared of a bunch, but I think my biggest fear would have to be… losing all of you as friends.”

That was heartwarming and Hunter tried to ignore how her hand squeezed his a little tighter when she answered. He also tried not to think about how Gus never told her that she had to keep holding his hand for the remainder of the game and yet she still was. Amity decided to share hers as well, “Mine is the dark.”

“You’re afraid of the dark?” Luz asked her, then she smiled and held her hands balled up in front of her face, “Oh my gosh, that’s so cute!”

Amity laughed at her girlfriend’s silly response to everything she did and said, and then Gus piped up, “Ooh! Mine is clowns!”

“Clowns? Why clowns?” Matt asked with a raised eyebrow.

“They wear face paint to make them look like they’re always smiling but they’re not always smiling, Matt! They’re hiding something!” He replied a bit aggressively.

“Okay jeez,” He held up his hands defensively.

“What’s your biggest fear, Matt?” Willow asked.

“Was this not a question for you? Why do I have to answer?” He sounded irritated now, but that wasn’t surprising.

“Because we’re all sharing now, just answer,” Luz shrugged, happy.

“Ugh, fine. I guess my biggest fear would be… bugs,” He answered, shrinking a bit as if embarrassed by this.

“Oh yuck, yeah they’re gross,” Amity agreed.

“No, they’re not! They’re fun little guys!” Willow defended the creatures.

“Leave it to the plant lady to like insects,” Matt joked in a deadpan.

“Ooh, my turn!” Luz butt in excitedly, “I’m afraid of nothing!”

Amity rolled her eyes, “You’re afraid of being shrunk to the size of a mouse.”

“That’s an odd one,” Matt said.

“I don’t wanna be squished!” Luz defended herself.

Gus laughed at his friend's response, then he looked at the last person to answer, “What about you, Hunter? What are you afraid of?”

It was an innocent question, they’d all been having fun, and Hunter didn’t think much of it when he answered, it was after he answered that the reality of his response hit him, “Belos.”

He didn’t even put much thought into it, and he was afraid of other things, but the question had been *‘what’s your biggest fear?’* and Belos was his answer, plain and simple. He should’ve answered with something else though, like being trapped in a small space or heights or something stupid like that, because those were very much fears of his too. But no, he had to go with the one that struck everyone in the room silent and forced concerned looks onto him. He hated it when people looked at him like that.

“I-I mean—” He tried to take it back, but it was too late, it was already out there. He wasn’t going to panic, not this time, not in front of his friends. He wouldn’t ruin anything else because of his brain that was constantly overwhelmed. And yet, the thing that took place of his heart began to race, his lungs struggled to pull in air, and his mind became foggy, or maybe those were his eyes.

“Hunter?” Willow squeezed his hand and was looking at him with concern like everyone else.

He should step outside for a minute. He pulled his hand out of Willow’s and stumbled to his feet, “I’m sorry, I’m— I’m gunna go get some air.”

And then he stormed out without taking a look back.

- - -

He sat on the front step of Matt’s house, knees drawn up and arms wrapped around them, sniffling and trying to dry his tears. He wasn’t panicking because of what he said to them in there, he was just upset that he’d put a dent in an otherwise great night. Everyone had been happy, they’d all been laughing, and Gus finally asked Matt out, and of course here he comes to ruin it all. He’s always ruining everything. He feels so stupid.

Flapjack wasn’t here with him tonight, for once he’d gone out and done something without her. It was a risk, she was always a source of comfort for him when he felt overwhelmed, but he wanted to do something on his own tonight. He was starting to feel like that was a mistake.

He can't do anything right, and definitely not on his own.

The door creaked behind him, which wasn't surprising. He knew someone would come looking for him eventually, he had just run off out of the blue. He reached his hands up to wipe at his face, getting rid of the evidence of crying and taking a deep breath. He turned to glance over his shoulder at the one who'd come to check on him, "I'm fine, Luz—"

Willow stood there on the porch, looking at him with a sad sort of expression on her face. He was surprised to see her honestly, "Willow… It's you."

"It's me," She replied, wringing her hands anxiously in front of her, "Did you want me to be somebody else? I can go get—"

"N-no, it's fine, I was just… Surprised to see you, that's all," He told her, his tone sad.

Willow frowned deeper than she already had been, "Well, I had to come check on my friend. Are you okay?"

He sniffled and chuckled fakely, "Never better."

He turned away from her to look at the ground again and she felt her heart drop when she caught a glimpse of the tear tracks on his face just before he looked away. She stepped across the porch and dropped onto the step next to him, sitting close, their arms nearly touching. She looked out at the land in front of their friend's home, trying to find the right words to say.

"Hunter, you know we don't judge you for your past, right?" She wanted to make sure of this, because she hated the thought of him thinking they hated him based on things that were never even his fault.

He shook his head, "It's not that that's bothering me."

Her eyebrows pulled together to form a curious expression, "Then what is? You can tell me."

Hunter exhaled deeply, "It's just… Every time something good is happening, I ruin it."

Willow shook her head, "No, you don't—"

"Yes, I do," He spoke a little louder, "First day of school, things are going great and I had a panic attack in Illusions. First Flyer Derby scrimmage and I broke our opponent's nose, and the second scrimmage I ended up getting hurt after we won. And now, we were all having fun in there and even I was relaxed for once! *Me!* But then I had to bring up something stupid and it ruined everyone's mood and it's all my fault!"

Willow wasn't going to give him much time to bask in that sadness and self-deprecation, "Hunter, none of that was your fault. We weren't upset in there because of what you said, just surprised because you don't bring up that name a lot and for very good reason."

He scoffed, "But you're upset now."

"Because *you're* upset," She turned to face him, reaching forward to take his hand in hers just like she had done inside, "When you're upset, we're upset, that's how it goes when you have friends."

"I don't want it to be that way," He admitted, his voice low and quiet, as if he were trying to whisper, "I'm not worth crying over."

She squeezed his hand, anger and annoyance bubbling under the surface but not directed at him. She just hated that he felt this way, she hated the man who had made him feel this way. She calmed herself, inhaling deeply and then exhaling, relaxing her nerves. She tugged on his hand gently, pulling it into her lap and then taking ahold of his hand with her other one, holding it in both of them now. His hands were sensitive, she knew that, so she was careful. She pressed her thumbs against his palm, massaging it softly.

“Can I tell you a secret?” She asked.

He had been so focused on his hand in hers that when she spoke again, he flinched. He blinked and pulled his attention to her face, but she was keeping her eyes on their joined hands. He swallowed and nodded slightly, “Yeah, sure.”

She curled his fingers and brushed a thumb over the top of them, caressing his hand tenderly, and she released a breath, “I cried for you after you told us everything about what you learned in Belos’ mindscape. You know, back when we were in the human realm.”

Hunter’s eyes widened in surprise, “Y-You did? But you seemed fine when I told you. You—”

“I was barely holding it together,” She confessed, bringing her head up to look at him again, wearing an incredulous but somehow at the same time, soft smile on her face, “You were so scared that we were going to hate you and you’d convinced yourself that we would abandon you just for who you are and for things you never could control. It was hard seeing you like that, Hunter, it always is.”

He was always baffled when people told him stuff like that. Comprehending that people genuinely cared about him and wouldn’t hurt him or leave him behind was so hard to do and believe. He lowered his gaze to look at his hand in hers, his fingers twitching slightly before he carefully squeezed her hand back. She instinctively curled her fingers tighter around his, but she was surprised by his actions no less. When she looked up at him again, she saw he was looking at the land in front of the house again.

“Is it my turn to share a secret?” He asked, his voice weak from emotions trying to break through the surface. She didn’t answer him, just watched him, and he told her what he wanted to anyway, “I cried for you, too.”

Now it was her turn to be surprised, “W-What? Really? Why?”

“You were worried about your dad’s, and about everyone here in the Boiling Isles,” He told her, “You were scared we were trapped and that we would never be able to come home, that you would never see your parents again or that Gus wouldn’t see his dad, or that any of us would ever reunite with the people we love. It made me sad because I knew you were blaming yourself somehow, you always take all the heavy things on your shoulders, so we don’t have to carry it. You never asked for help once, either. You never asked for a shoulder to cry on, instead you offered to be the shoulder. That must have been so hard.”

Willow felt her eyes burn with every word he spoke, and it made her squeeze his hand harder. She took a shaky breath and tried to deal with the weight of what he’d just said to her, “It… was. It was *so hard.* But I’d do it over again if it meant you and the others were happy.”

Hunter grimaced and leaned forward a bit to catch her eyes, “We weren’t happy though, Willow. We were trapped in a whole new world with no way to get back and-and you were forcing yourself to pretend that everything was okay, just so we wouldn’t worry. But… it just ended up worrying us more because we knew you were hurting.”

Willow didn't realize she had been that obvious, that she couldn't conceal her true feelings. She felt like crying, but at the same time she smiled because Hunter was so close to realizing something about himself too, "Well then, I guess me and you are in the same boat."

And finally it clicked. Hunter stared at her in shock, and confusion, and he shook his head ever so slightly, "I— I'm dealing with my trauma."

Willow nodded and scooted closer to him, "You are, and we're so proud of you for that, but you also have a tendency of shoving all of it down when you're around us because you don't want us to worry about you. But—"

"It makes you worry more," He repeated what he'd said about her just a moment ago.

Willow nodded with a tight smile and watery eyes, and then she giggled, "Looks like we both need to work on opening up."

Hunter looked at his feet, "I'm getting better…"

"I believe you," She told him, and her tone was so soft it made Hunter's voice leave him for a moment; she was always so careful when speaking with him.

Willow sighed and leaned her head back, looking up at the stars and trying to rid her eyes of unshed tears. The stars were shining bright in the sky; Matt's house was out of the way from the rest of the town, meaning the light pollution was low and making the sky clearer at night, "I love looking at the stars when I'm feeling stressed. It calms me down. It's such a big world."

He lifted his head to look up at the stars too. They were bright tonight, hundreds of them littering the dark canvas. He breathed deep, feeling a wave of calm crash over him as he looked up, the pressure of Willow's hand still holding onto his soothing him as well. His eyes shone as he spoke, "It's beautiful."

He sounded calmer now, his tone lighter. Willow pulled her gaze away from the stars and looked at him, stopping in her tracks when she did. His hair was gently tousled by the slight breeze, his hair having grown slightly longer as the year progressed. His eyes were bright as they reflected the stars above him, and his expression was peaceful despite his eyes still being slightly puffy and his face a bit red from crying a few minutes ago. The moonlight illuminated his face, his scarred side facing her. She breathed and spoke softly, "It is."

The tone of her voice made him look at her again and he saw her face had a pink tint to it now. She squeezed his hand again before releasing it, humming and getting to her feet. She watched where she was stepping and went to the bottom of the steps of the porch, stepping into the grass and lifting her gaze to the stars again. She hummed sweetly as she stepped around and stargazed, all the while Hunter nervously stimmed while still seated on the step.

He thought of his friends still inside, probably worried about him, but he also thought of Gus and Matt and about how Gus had finally worked up the nerve to do what he's always wanted to. They had never made that pact Luz had suggested, but they might as well have. Hunter watched Willow walk around, no shoes on her feet and feeling the grass beneath her. She was smiling as she watched the sky, and she smiled bigger when a shooting star shot across the horizon, pointing up at it and glancing at him briefly to show it to him. He doesn't think he's ever seen someone quite so beautiful.

With his galdorstone hammering in his chest and his palms sweating, he got himself to his feet. He quickly stepped down into the grass as well, and he kneeled down just a few feet from Willow. She

turned to face him when she saw him move out of the corner of her eye, and she furrowed her eyebrows curiously as he crouched down, “Hunter? What are you doing?”

He drew a glyph in the dirt with a twig he found nearby, drawing a circle around the finished symbol to complete it and he answered her question, “Magic.”

He closed the circle and tapped the center of the glyph, and in just a moment a small white flower sprouted from the ground. Willow recognized it, but she’d only seen it in the human realm, meaning this was a glyph that was modified, and not easily either. He pulled the flower from the ground and got to his feet, stepping over to Willow with purpose. He looked so incredibly nervous, but he stuck out his arm and offered the flower to her. What happened next made her heart skip a beat.

“Willow, you’re the strongest, bravest, and kindest person I know. You always know how to make me smile and I feel safe when I’m with you, which is a hard thing for me to feel,” She could hear his voice shaking but she wasn’t focusing on it too much because the sound of her heart pounding hard against her sternum was overpowering it, “I’ve had feelings for you since the day we met and I know this probably isn’t the way you pictured this happening but… Would you like to go out with me?”

Her face was on fire, her heart was hammering, and she felt like she was walking on air. At first, she was so surprised that she didn’t know how to reply, but realizing he was waiting for an answer she pulled herself out of her shock. She smiled, tears burning her eyes, “You… Want to go out with *me?”*

His fingers twitched nervously around the stim of the flower, “Of-of course! You’re Willow Park, what more do I need to say?”

She giggled; she felt like crying, “And you’re Hunter Clawthorne, the smartest and sweetest person I’ve ever met, and you’re asking me out on a date.”

His face was as red as hers, his ears too, “I-I’m asking if you’d like to be my girlfriend.”

She wanted to hug him so badly, “I’d love to be your girlfriend, Hunter.”

His ears twitched and perked up, something she always thought was cute, and he looked surprised, “Really?!”

She giggled, “Yeah, really!”

He finally smiled, showing off the gap between his teeth and he flapped his empty hand while handing her the flower in his other, “Here, I learned how to make this for you.”

That was quite possibly the sweetest thing she’s ever heard. She took the flower from him and beamed at the sight of it, then she caught his eyes again and seeing the smile on his face made her heart soar. She leapt forward and wrapped her arms around his waist, picking him up off of his feet and twirling him around. He laughed as she did so, and when she set him on his feet he exhaled deeply and set a hand to his chest.

“Wow, that was the scariest thing I’ve ever done,” He admitted.

Willow tilted her head, though she still smiled, “Asking me out? No, you’ve done way scarier.”

He grinned and shook his head, his cowlick falling against his forehead; he didn’t fix it this time, “Nope! That was it!”

Willow giggled and wrapped him up in a hug, pressing her head against his shoulder, and though he wasn’t very good at hugs he returned her embrace happily. He felt better now, safe. It was as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. For once, the anxiety that often formed a figurative dark cloud above his head had cleared into sunny skies. He felt like he could fly.

Tonight hadn’t been so bad after all.

Chapter End Notes

writing that confession had me crying behind my computer screen. i'm so proud and happy with the way it turned out. let me know what you thought plz!! the final chapter will be posted on thursday, and im sad it's almost over :(but happy that i was able to write a story that im so proud of!! i'll see you guys then, and have a great day/night!!

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

> Hunter finally realizes that it's okay for him to be happy, he just needed a little nudge from the people he cares about most to remind him of that.

Chapter Notes

> omg it's the final chapter. im actually so fucking proud of this fic and im proud of myself. my motivation is known to be really bad, but i stuck with this the entire time and finished it, and i had so much fun the entire time. this is probably my favorite fic i've ever written, and im so happy you guys all loved it as much as i did!! thank you so much for sticking thru this with me, i couldn't be happier with how this turned out. i hope u enjoy the conclusion!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Getting dressed for Grom wasn't an easy task. He didn't really have the best sense of fashion, which he never found to be a problem before, but now he had to *'dress to impress.'* He may have panicked a little, and he may have put on an old suit he found in the coat closet that belonged to Eda when she went to Grom when she was his age. It didn't look good at all, and despite Eda telling him he looked amazing, Raine was bad at hiding displeased expressions and Darius laughed at him. It was embarrassing, but it was then that Darius offered to help him, so he supposes it worked out for the best in the end.

Luz has been teasing him all week for his anxiety over the dance, and it usually ended in him snapping at her even if she didn't seem to mind. King made fun of him too, and so did his friends at school. He and Willow, despite being a couple now, weren't so different. They still got along just the same, nothing had changed, especially how flustered they got just being around each other.

Now it was the day of the dance and Hunter was the most nervous he's been in a long time, not including the constant threat of the world collapsing around him back before he started living with Eda, Raine, and Darius of course. He was currently in his room, trying to figure out what to do with his hair. It was getting longer again, his cowlick being a pain in his ass but Luz kept telling him not to cut it, so he kept on listening. His hair had gotten to the point that some of it hung against his forehead, and it was definitely longer in the back. He couldn't really call it an undercut anymore. He needed a cut, but he'd had bigger things to worry about than his hair recently.

There was a knock on his door and looking over his shoulder he saw Eda standing there, leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed, "Need some help?"

He turned back to the mirror and shrugged, "With what?"

"You've been glaring at yourself for a while now. I've been waiting for you to grab the scissors," Eda chuckled before she walked into the room, "Worried about tonight, huh?"

“No, of course I’m not worried about tonight,” He tried, but when he saw Eda giving him a disbelieving look through the mirror he deflated, “Okay yeah, I’m worried about tonight.”

“Well, it is your first school dance,” Eda started, stepping a little closer to him until she was standing just behind his shoulder, “It’s normal to be nervous.”

“Were you nervous?” He asked her hopefully.

Eda scoffed, “Of course, I was! I tried to pretend that I wasn’t but when I saw Raine that night… I made a fool of myself, I’m glad they decided I was the one.”

Hunter shrunk, “Oh Titan, I don’t want to make a fool of myself.”

Eda chuckled again and reached a gentle hand up and patted his shoulder, “Don’t worry, kid, you won’t. I’m pretty sure you could do absolutely anything and Willow would look at you with those stars in her eyes.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say anything,” He tried, building scenario after scenario in his head of horrible things that could make him look like an idiot tonight in front of his girlfriend and all of their friends.

“Did you or did you not try and kidnap your friends to the Emperor’s Coven when you all first met?” Eda asked him.

Well, she had a point there, “Okay, I get your point, but still! What if I trip up the stairs or spill apple blood on myself or-or—”

“Calm down,” Eda laughed, grabbing his shoulders and carefully spinning him around to face her. He was incredibly nervous, she could see that, so she softened her gaze, “You’re gunna do great, alright? You can recover from a little trip up the steps, and I can clean apple blood out of clothes, trust me, I’ve had to many, *many* times.”

Hunter frowned, his thoughts running a hundred miles a minute as they often did, “But what if she thinks—”

“You’re the most beautiful person there? Don’t worry, she will!” Eda reassured him, and then she lifted a hand slowly and set it on his head, ruffling his hair.

“Hey!” He grumbled, swatting at her hands.

She pulled away and smiled with pride, “There! You look great!”

“But—”

“All naturale, kid! It works for ya!” She snapped her fingers and shot him finger-guns, “Now go get em!”

She turned away to leave him be, and it took Hunter a moment to gather his thoughts, but eventually he was calling her name to stop her from leaving, “Hey Eda?”

She stopped at the door and turned halfway to look at him again, smiling somewhat smugly, “Yes?”

Hunter looked down at his hands clasped at his waist, fingers fidgeting. He exhaled before he spoke, “Um, I never thanked you. You know, for letting me stay here. For taking me in. I don’t

know where I'd be if you guys didn't take a chance on me, so… thank you."

He didn't look at her the entire time he said that, too anxious to see her reaction and not completely comfortable with speaking his heart there. But he needed to say it, and she needed to hear it. It was quiet for a moment, and the silence is what made him lift his gaze, and when he did Eda was already walking towards him. Before he knew it, she was hugging him. He wasn't very good at these sorts of things, but she didn't mind, no one ever did.

"I'd do the same thing again and I'd do it every time," She told him, her voice having lowered to an almost whisper, her hold around him firm and loving, "I'm proud of you, and I'm glad you're here."

He felt his eyes fill with tears, but he didn't shed any. He did smile though, and he lifted his arms to return her embrace, leaning into her and closing his eyes, "I'm glad I'm here too."

She ran a hand up and down his back a few times before she leaned away to press a kiss to the side of his head and then finally pulled away. She held him at arm's length and smiled, her own eyes glassed over with unshed tears. She reached up and took a strand of his hair in between her fingers, twirling it around a finger and smiling, "Your hair looks good, kid. Leave it as it is."

He couldn't say he agreed but he'd trust Eda on this one, "Yeah, alright. If you say so–"

"Then it must be true," She retorted and let him go, stepping back, "Remember to let me get a picture before you leave, I've got a frame to go next to the one of Luz from last year."

He nodded and chuckled, "Okay, I will."

Eda let her eyes linger on him for a couple more seconds, still smiling, and then she finally turned away and left him alone. For some reason, he felt better. His hair wasn't bothering him so much anymore. He turned towards his mirror again to look at it; it was ruffled and a little messy from where Eda had her hand in it, so he smoothed it out just a little to make it look like he hadn't just rolled out of bed, but he didn't do anything else to it. He'd go to Grom as it was. It's not like he knew how to do his hair anyway.

He scratched at his face when an itch arose, and he squinted and leaned closer to the mirror. Now, he didn't have a lot of facial hair, he couldn't grow it very well. This was either a teenager thing or a Grimwalker thing, he wasn't sure. The hair on his face was patchy though, so he kept it shaved, or… at least he tried to. He wasn't very good at shaving and this problem had just become that recently. He cut himself often and had to deal with the teasing at school when he showed up with little scabs on his face. But he needed to shave before the dance later, these patchy places looked weird.

So, he made the trip to the bathroom. Eda had gotten him a razor and shaving cream, and he'd assured her he knew what he was doing so denied any help from anyone. They all knew he was lying but left him alone because they didn't want to aggravate him. But he really didn't want to go to Grom with scabs on his face, so he thought maybe he should ask for some help, just this once.

He didn't think Eda would know how to shave her face, so he looked for one of the other two. Darius was probably still in his room, so he went that way, but he didn't quite make it there because he was stopped when he caught sight of Raine in one of the spare rooms. He peered inside and saw them sitting in a small armchair, one leg crossed over the other and a book in their lap. Raine was usually the least likely candidate to make fun of him, so he stepped inside to go and ask for their help.

“What are you reading?” He opened with a different question.

Raine lifted their gaze from the words on the page, and they smiled when they saw who had come in, “Oh, hello Hunter. I’m just reading one of those books you’re always rambling about.”

They held it up so Hunter could see the title and he smiled softly when he saw it was a book on fossils, “Oh, I didn’t know you liked reading those too.”

Raine shrugged loosely and kept a smile on their face as they looked back to the book for a moment, “I just wanted to see what it was about these sorts of things that always have you so excited. I must say, I understand your exhilaration,” They marked their place and closed the book gently before giving Hunter their full attention again, “Anyway, shouldn’t you be getting ready for Grom? It’s only a couple of hours away now.”

Hunter wrung his hands awkwardly, “Yeah, actually I needed your help.”

“My help?” Raine seemed surprised, raising an eyebrow.

Hunter nodded, “I uh, need help shaving. I got this scratchy hair here and it doesn’t look very good and—”

“Sure, I’ll help!” Raine smiled.

“Really? You wouldn’t mind?” He asked sort of nervously, shoulders stiff.

Raine chuckled, standing up from their chair and setting the book aside, “I course, I don’t! It’s a parent's job to teach their kids life skills and this is one of those moments!”

They swung their arm around, looking prideful. Hunter was still having a hard time getting used to them all referring to themselves as his parents, and them referring to him as their son. Raine stepped towards him and motioned for the door, “Come along, I’ll get you looking spiffy in no time!”

Hunter couldn’t help the smirk that pulled at his lips when he followed after the bard. They went down the hall and found the bathroom, and Raine made Hunter stand in front of the mirror. They grabbed a hand towel and wrapped it around Hunter’s neck, covering his chest so he didn’t get his clothes wet. They rifled through some drawers and cabinets, grabbing shaving cream and putting a fresh razor head on Hunter’s usual razor.

They turned to him and turned on the sink in the same movement, “First of all, wet your face. Never forget to use water when shaving, makes for way less chance of cutting yourself.”

Hunter nodded curtly and did as he was told, wetting his hands and bringing them to his face a few times, effectively dampening it. When that was done, Raine was handing him the can of shaving cream, “Put some of this on. Be generous but not too generous.”

Again, Hunter listened, taking the can from Raine and applying the shaving cream, “I did both of these things before, the water and shaving cream I mean, so why do I always mess this up?”

“It’s probably the way you run the razor across your skin,” Raine explained, “You might not be gliding it the right direction, or maybe you go too fast.”

“Oh, I always thought I was moving efficiently,” He thought out loud.

“Who taught you before?” Raine was curious.

Hunter just shrugged, answering that question simply, “I learned on my own. Trial and error, you know? Apparently not enough trial and error though.”

Raine frowned. They thought at least somebody would have taught the boy, but they supposed that was wishful thinking. The kid didn’t have much experience with a lot of things, he had been sheltered and no one had ever really raised him. Raine took a certain pride in being able to help Hunter now.

“Well, after today you’ll know the proper way to do this,” Raine smiled kindly, making Hunter smile in return looking through the mirror.

He wiped his hands on the towel, and he exhaled, “Now what?”

“Well now…” Raine grabbed the razor off of the counter, taking the guard off of it and handing it to the teenager, “We shave.”

Hunter took the razor from them, but he didn’t make any moves to start shaving. Raine opened a drawer under the sink, rifling through it and searching for another razor, finding it underneath some toothpaste and hair ties; this was often the bathroom the kids used so it wasn’t particularly organized. They pulled out the razor and held it up to their face, showing Hunter what to do.

“First of all, we start here,” They gestured to their cheek, and with the shaving guard still on, pressed the head of the razor to the area, “Shave down, keep it slow so you don’t cut yourself.”

Hunter quietly spoke a confirmation and did as he was instructed, shaving downwards and slowly. He didn’t have any hair on this part of his face really, so he didn’t press the razor too hard against his skin. He moved to the other cheek when he was done with the first, and when he was finished completely, he looked to Raine for the next step.

“Alright, now you need to rinse the razor,” They instructed, “Always keep it as clean as possible, it leaves for less, well, blood.”

This process continued on until Hunter had his entire face shaved, and then Raine was handing him a towel to wipe away any excess foam. When all was said and done, Hunter didn’t have any more patchy hair on his lip and in other sporadic areas on his face. Looking in the mirror, he thought he looked cleaner despite the fact whatever hair he did have on his face was barely even noticeable before.

He smiled happily, “Thanks, Raine. Not a cut in sight.”

Raine chuckled, “Does wonders to know what you’re doing.”

They patted Hunter gently between his shoulder blades, inspecting his handiwork through the mirror. Hunter did think he looked cleaner now than before, but that nervousness about the entire night in general was still twisting his guts. He balled his fists with anxiety at his sides and exhaled sharply, “You really think she’ll like me?”

Raine’s smile fell a little at the question, but they corrected it in just a second, “Of course, she will! You’re still having doubts?”

Hunter shrugged awkwardly, “It’s just… she’s so… *Willow.* And I’m just… *me.”*

Raine pulled their hand away from where it rested on Hunter’s back, crossing their arms and raising an eyebrow, “And what’s wrong with that?”

Hunter's eyes widened, sensing he was in trouble, "N-Nothing! I just— I don't know! Eda already gave me a talk about this, I should be feeling better about it now…"

Raine smiled and rolled their eyes, lighthearted; they set their hand on Hunter's shoulder this time, "Don't worry, I understand. Everybody's first Grom is a big deal, it's full of anxiety and the constant urge to puke."

Hunter made an amused sound, smiling just a little, "Glad to know I'm not alone."

"You're not," Raine reassured, "If anything, Willow is just as nervous as you."

"You think so?" Hunter asked, feeling bad about feeling hopeful.

"Are you kidding me? She's going out with *you,* and she thinks the world of you, she's probably just as scared about messing up as you are!" Raine told him, "I know so."

"Oh, well… She doesn't have to be scared. She could never mess up in my eyes," He admitted.

Raine smiled bigger and scooted closer, making Hunter turn away from the mirror to actually face them, "She probably feels the same about you."

That made sense, but it didn't wash the anxiety away. Though it did ease his stress just a little, "I hope you're right."

"I am," Raine smiled, patting the boy's shoulder, "Now go find Darius. You need to leave here in about an hour, better go get dressed."

Oh yeah, Darius was probably waiting on him and the man wasn't incredibly patient. He agreed with a nod, "Okay. Thanks, Raine. Um, for teaching me how to shave and for the pep-talk afterwards."

Raine chuckled, "No problem, Hunter. Anything for my kid."

Hunter's smile grew, and before he left the room, he leaned forward to give Raine a hug. He never initiated these, it was always someone else who was hugging him, so it took Raine a bit by surprise. They stumbled back a little but steadied themself, and when what was happening was processed through their mind, that's when they returned his embrace. Hunter was about as tall as them, but Raine figured he'd probably be taller before long. It was odd thinking of this kid getting bigger, they can remember when he was a little boy running around the halls of the palace, oversized uniform making him look smaller than he probably was. Eyes too tired, scars too many, personality much too broken for a child of his small stature. Now he was grown, still with tired eyes and scars to last a lifetime, personality still broken but better. *He* was doing better. The smile that used to never shine shone brighter these days.

He was broken, but he was mending the pieces that he could find.

He pulled away from Raine, smiling at them kindly, "Well, I should go find Darius before he gets grouchy about me being late."

Raine laughed, "Yeah, we don't want that. Titan knows that man has the patience of a wet cat."

Hunter chuckled again and let go of Raine, "I'll see you before I leave. Eda wanted pictures or something."

"Well, of course! We already have a frame on the wall for it!" Raine called to him as he stepped

around them to leave the room.

“Always prepared,” Hunter jabbed with a smile.

“Well, that’s something you didn’t inherit,” Raine joked as they crossed their arms.

“Hey!” Hunter called, glaring playfully.

Raine shooed him off with a wave of their hand, and with a smile on both of their faces Hunter left the bathroom and went off to find his third guardian. He was in his room, he knew that much. It was at the end of the hall, the room he’d been staying in *‘temporarily’* big enough for all of his extra belongings as well as harboring a large window for him to watch the sun set.

He reached the door at the end of the hall; he could hear some old classical music playing inside the room. He always thought Darius took pride in his classy lifestyle, but Hunter had seen the less classy side of him. The man threw tantrums when his clothes got dirty, he shouted at Eberwolf when he got too much on his nerves. He was incredibly particular, but his fuse was short, it’s something he’s been working on taming.

Hunter lifted a closed fist and knocked on the door, gentle but loud enough for Darius to be able to hear it over the music. Hunter heard some shuffling around inside, floorboards creaking as the man on the other side of the door stepped closer and closer. The doorknob jiggled and then the door opened, revealing Darius in a pair of purple silk pants and a black tank-top; it was surprising to see him in something so casual and relaxed.

“I was starting to wonder when you’d show up,” He said, but he didn’t sound particularly upset.

“Sorry. Raine was showing me how to shave,” He explained quickly.

“I see that,” Darius noticed the lack of patchy hair on the kid’s face, and he also noticed how anxious he seemed, “Come in, I’m just finishing up.”

He turned and walked back into his room, Hunter following after him. He didn’t come in here often; Darius was very adamant about his privacy and alone time. He looked around the room, finding it was kept pretty tidy, though he could see there was a lot of stuff in here, too much stuff considering he’s been telling him and everyone else for months that this wouldn’t be his permanent residence and he’d be moving back to his home soon.

“Wow, and I thought I was a clean freak,” Hunter commented as he looked around.

Darius waved a hand around, “I like to keep my space tidy, same as you.”

“More than me,” Hunter replied.

Darius sighed, “You literally just walked in and you’re already being a pain. I guess I should be happy you’re acting like yourself though, hm?”

Hunter smirked and scrunched his shoulders up, “Did you miss me that much?”

Darius smiled back and relaxed his own shoulders, “That I did, little one.”

He was very happy to see Hunter acting in a way that was most authentic. He still had his struggles of course, more than others, but he smiled more, laughed more. He was less worried, more friendly. His cockiness had come back too, he was back to using that tone of voice that made people want to shove a sock down his throat to shut him up, but no one ever did. They liked

listening to him and being around him, they were all so glad he was beginning to do better.

“Come over here, you can try on the shirt. I can see if I need to hem it anymore,” Darius motioned with a hand for him to follow him.

Hunter stopped behind Darius, the former covenhead reaching over and grabbing the freshly ironed shirt off the ironing board. He shook it out a little and then turned to hand it to Hunter. Hunter took it from him and pulled it over his t-shirt. He buttoned it up and when he was done, he looked down at himself and thought it fit comfortably enough. It wasn’t itchy or anything, it was actually quite soft. It didn’t wrinkle up uncomfortably and it didn’t fit tight anywhere making it snug, it fit just right.

“Wow Darius, this fits perfect,” Hunter complimented.

Darius smiled with pride, “I’m glad you like it. I used that microfiber material you like so much.”

That made Hunter smile and his heart warm, “Thanks.”

Darius gestured to the stand-up mirror against the wall in the corner, “Go see how you like the look.”

Hunter listened, stepping over to the mirror. He really doesn’t care all that much for the look of clothes, he never saw the point. If it fit, then that was all that mattered, but Darius was always going on and on about how He was a bit dramatic, but Hunter supposes he had to learn his own dramatic flair from someone.

Hunter stopped in front of the mirror, taking in the look of the shirt and he really did like the way it looked. It was just a cream-colored collared shirt, cuffs around the wrists, and some sort of floral detail around the collar and down the strip the buttons were stitched. The design made Hunter’s face flush a bit, “Flowers. Kind of like—”

“Willow’s favorites? Yes, you’ve mentioned them before,” Darius said, “You know, you never stop talking about that girl.”

He felt awkward, he always did when talking about her, but he was able to find a reply, “Well, there’s a lot to say.”

Now that made Darius smile, and he chuckled, “Titan, you are smitten,” he went over to grab another article of clothing, a pair of brown pants, and he handed them to the teenager, “Here, put on the rest of your outfit. You don’t want to be late.”

He took the pants from Darius and held them to his chest, watching as Darius turned away to give him some privacy. He pulled out his scroll to mess with as he waited for Hunter to get dressed, so Hunter got to it. It only took a second to change out of his sweatpants and into the ones Darius had made for him, and he made sure to take off his t-shirt underneath his dress shirt before reapplying the button-down. He tucked it into his pants, and when he was finished, he turned to look at Darius, calling his name to let him know he could turn around.

Darius pocketed his scroll and spun back around to face Hunter, and he had to stop in his tracks looking at him. The shirt was shoddily tucked in, and he was without shoes, leaving him in blue socks with balloons on them - another gift courtesy of Luz. His hair was a mess in the best way, and he wore those black compression gloves Camilla had given him in the human realm. He pulled off the messy look quite well, which meant something coming from Darius who could be quite the perfectionist.

“Darius? Do I look alright? You’re not saying anything,” Hunter’s voice broke Darius from his reverie, and he blinked a couple of times before meeting Hunter’s eyes.

“Sorry, I just…” He exhaled deeply, relieved, and he smiled softly, “I’m really proud of you.”

Well, Hunter wasn’t expecting that. He looked down at himself awkwardly, then back at Darius, “W-What’s with you all of the sudden?”

Darius chuckled, “Am I not allowed to tell you I’m proud of you?”

Hunter shrugged, looking off to the side briefly, “I mean… I guess you are, but why now?”

Darius’ smile never fell, and he began stepping back over to Hunter, and when he reached him, he gently grabbed his shoulders and spun his back towards the mirror carefully, “Take a look at yourself, Hunter.”

He once again looked himself over, then he shrugged, “I-I just see me.”

“Yeah? Me too, but I want you to see the Hunter that I see,” Darius squeezed his shoulders just enough for him to feel it, “Look closer.”

Hunter exhaled and looked again. His clothes were nice, nicer than anything he’s ever worn. His socks didn’t match, and he didn’t plan on changing them so they would, and his gloves didn’t really fit the aesthetic of the outfit either. His hair was a mess, but Eda had told him she liked it and to keep it as it was, so he would. But the outfit was aside from the point, Darius told him he needed to look closer so he would try.

He didn’t see anything at first, just a boy who couldn’t dress to impress without help and had been dealing with some of the hardest times of his life. But he looked closer, tried to see what Darius was seeing, and it took him some time but eventually he started finding it in the small things.

His eyes weren’t as sunken, the dark circles still present but much lighter, not as concerning as they had been a few months ago. His complexion wasn’t as pale, and in turn it didn’t make him look as ill. He had put on a little bit of the weight he had lost, he stood straighter, and he overall didn’t look as exhausted as he always used to. He looked healthier. He made progress.

This was something to be proud of, and he thought maybe he might have been.

“Well?” Darius spoke up after a moment of silence, expression showing anticipation, “What do you see?”

Hunter didn’t reply at first, but he had heard him. He looked at himself a minute longer, and it was then that he realized that feeling he was feeling was pride. Before, he couldn’t stand looking at himself in the mirror, he reminded himself too much of a person he would never be. But he didn’t need to be that person, he just needed to be himself and he thinks he’s done a pretty good job at becoming that person. It didn’t hurt to look in the mirror anymore, not like before.

He took a deep breath and then let it go, as if he was letting the weight of the world fall off of his shoulders, and with it he answered Darius’ question, *“Me.”*

Darius smiled and walked up behind him, setting a careful hand on his shoulder, “And do you like what you see?”

Hunter took another breath and exhaled, nodding a little and a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth, “Yeah. I think I do.”

That made Darius smile wide, and he patted Hunter on the shoulder and turned him gently towards him; he began fixing his collar, “That’s good to hear. I don’t think you understand how happy that makes me.”

Hunter was still smiling as Darius adjusted his shirt collar and smoothed out any wrinkles he found on his shoulders. It did fall a little though, his mind always circulating something for him to worry over, “It’s still not easy though.”

Darius’ eyes flicked up to look at him for a moment, but he quickly went back to focusing on the task at hand, “I know that. You’ve been through a lot, it won’t be easy sometimes, but you’re doing very well. I bet your friends help you a lot.”

Hunter smiled again and he nodded, “Yeah, they do. They’re surprisingly patient.”

Darius chuckled, “Yes, people who care about you tend to be.”

“If I recall, you’ve told me your patience is thin,” Hunter joked with a smug grin.

Darius rolled his eyes, “My patience is thin, but not with you. Never with you.”

That was nice to hear, it warmed his heart. It was quiet again for a moment and Hunter stood there and let Darius make sure his outfit was to the standard he saw fit. Hunter thought the outfit looked fine, but Darius was always a perfectionist when it came to things like this.

“Well, it used to be,” Hunter shrugged very slightly, and that made Darius stop what he was doing so he could look at the boy. Hunter probably shouldn’t have brought that up and he was quickly apologizing, “S-Sorry, I didn’t mean it to start a—”

“No, no. It’s alright. You’re right,” Darius said, looking a bit sheepish actually and it surprised Hunter, “I… wasn’t always kind to you, was I?”

Hunter blinked. He hadn’t said that to start anything, really, but Darius had taken it seriously. Hunter held up his hands and shook his head, “It’s alright, Darius. I’m not upset about it or anything, I was just—”

“That’s a lie, and you know it,” Darius said it sternly, but he chuckled a moment later, “You can talk to me, you know?”

Hunter frowned and looked up at him, hands coming together at his waist and wringing nervously. He shifted from foot to foot, and then he said, “You can talk to me, too.”

Darius was quiet at that; surprised Hunter had even said that. What did he even need to talk about? He was trying to help Hunter here, so why was he telling him that if he needed to talk, he could? Back in the Emperor’s Coven it was hard to see who Hunter truly was, he had been so caught up in trying to be on his best behavior around Belos and everyone else that his true self only shone through on rare occasions. Sometimes it still surprised him just how kind and sensitive Hunter truly was.

“What would I–”

“You know what,” Hunter cut him short, smiling something soft, something Darius wasn’t sure he had ever seen on the kid’s face before.

He just looked at him for a moment, seeing this sweet and kindhearted kid telling him that it was okay if he needed to talk about what was bothering him too. He was a kid, but he’d be grown soon,

and that maturity was really showing despite the childhood he had.

Darius exhaled deeply and smiled back at him, “You’re better at reading people than you’re given credit for.”

Hunter shrugged loosely, “It’s what I get for hanging around those nerds I call friends.”

Darius chuckled, and then he sighed, relaxing his shoulders. His smile was still present, but his eyes looked sadder now, and the next words that fell from his lips seemed out of his control, “I’m so sorry for the way I treated you.”

Hunter shook his head, “You treated me accordingly, Darius. You had a job to do, and you weren’t cruel to me.”

“I was, though. I… truly was,” He frowned now, averting his eyes but only momentarily; when he looked back at Hunter, he was frowning now too, his maroon eyes curious. Darius kneeled down in front of him and went back to fixing the little imperfections in Hunter’s shirt as he spoke, “Sure, I never laid a hand on you, and the things I said to you were… mean-spirited but never things you didn’t let roll off of your back, but… I knew what was going on, and I never stepped in.”

Hunter’s shoulders fell and he tried to comfort him, “Darius, that’s not your fault. You knew what was at risk. Your whole plan would have fallen apart if you had tried to help me then.”

“Nothing was as important as you and your safety,” Darius shot him a look, stern and so incredibly serious, “Absolutely nothing.”

Hunter was shocked by his words and the look he had been given, and he swallowed thickly as he tried to think of what to say next. His voice was quieter now, almost a whisper when he found his words, “Darius, we’re talking about the entirety of the Boiling Isles.”

“And I’m talking about *you,”* He replied quickly, hands going to rest on Hunter’s shoulders, “There was a way to get you out sooner, I should’ve found it.”

“But—”

“You said you’d let me talk, so let me talk,” Darius told him, and Hunter’s mouth snapped shut. Darius sighed and closed his eyes briefly, “You were barely old enough to read properly the first time he hurt you. He slapped you; I remember because you came crying to me.”

Hunter looked off to the side sheepishly, “You were always the first person I went to, even if you acted like you hated it.”

Darius scoffed, “You’re telling me you saw through that?”

Hunter shook his head, and they met eyes again, “I’m telling you I trusted you.”

That was surprising to hear, “Even on that day you spent at Hexide? You flinched when I raised my hand.”

Hunter still felt embarrassed about that, “Sorry, I… I don’t have the greatest history with adults being angry with me.”

Darius smirked, and then he lifted his hand to ruffle Hunter’s hair; he didn’t flinch this time at all, “I wasn’t angry with you. I’m… not sure I ever was.”

Hunter scoffed like he didn't believe that, "C'mon Darius, I was an annoying brat, it's okay if you didn't—"

"No," Darius' hands squeezed Hunter's shoulders a little harder, but not too hard, just enough to stop Hunter from going on with what he was saying. Hunter was surprised to see the absolute pain in the man's eyes.

"Darius…?"

Darius bit his bottom lip to stop himself from getting too worked up, and then he spoke again, "I was angry at Belos, I was angry at the world, and I was angry at myself. But Hunter, I was *never* angry with you."

Hunter didn't say anything, he just stood there and kept his focus on Darius, listening intently to what he had to say next. His fingers kept curling and uncurling, anxiously awaiting Darius' next words, and the galdorstone in his chest ached with anticipation.

"You were put into this world to serve a purpose; you never had the choice to make a choice. You were told what to do and how to do it from the moment you took your first breath," Darius explained something they both already knew, but Hunter never interrupted him, "Being angry with you… it would be asinine. I was angry at Belos for treating you like he did, and I was angry at the world for making your life miserable. Nothing that ever happened back then was your fault."

Hunter stared at him, waiting for him to continue, and when he didn't, he had to ask, "Why were you angry with yourself?"

Darius looked at the floor between them, smiling sadly and chewing on his lip, "Because I confused my anger at everything with anger at you," He lifted his gaze to look at Hunter again, and if Hunter wasn't mistaken, Darius' eyes were glassy with welling tears, "You were a scared kid who followed me around and was always trying to impress me, and what did I give you in return? Harsh words and a dismissive attitude. You needed me and it took me far too long to see it."

Hunter didn't know how to respond at first, but eventually he said with a shaking voice, "I'm not angry with you."

Darius chuckled, a noise that wasn't amused but surprised, maybe a little put off, "How can you not be?"

Hunter shrugged, his own eyes shining with unshed tears now, "I-I don't know. I guess I just… understand why you were the way you were for so long."

Darius scoffed, "But you didn't always understand, Hunter, and I know this."

Hunter shook his head, having to agree with that, "You're right. I didn't always understand… Do you know why I was always trying to impress you?"

"Because you wanted to prove that you weren't just a kid and you wanted to be taken seriously," Darius said it more like it was a fact rather than a query.

"Yes and no," Hunter admitted, and Darius looked curious, "I did want to be taken seriously, but about something I don't think even I had understood yet."

Darius' eyebrows pulled together, his unamused smile finally falling away from his face, "What do you mean?"

“Well… I was just a kid, and I always knew that,” He told him, having a hard time keeping eye contact through this entire explanation, “I wanted to be taken seriously, but not just as the Golden Guard. I… I think back then, despite not even knowing it myself, I think I was asking for help.”

Hunter took a breath and continued, not letting Darius interrupt just yet, “I wasn’t happy, I never was. It didn’t really hit me until that day at Hexide. I was able to hang out with people my age, and I had fun, a lot of fun. I don’t think I had ever been that genuinely happy before, and when it was over, I felt… sad. *Really sad.* Going back to the palace after that, I started to understand a little more. Everything I did there started feeling… *wrong.* I always felt like something was off, but after that I just fell into denial. So, what I’m trying to say is… Before I met all of my friends and after, that entire time I just wanted you or anybody for that matter to treat me the way I deserved to be treated.”

Darius had been waiting to hear him say something like that, and he couldn’t really help the smile that tugged at the corners of his lips at those words, “And how do you deserve to be treated, Hunter?”

This was probably one of the hardest things he’s ever had to admit, but he spoke it with confidence as he looked Darius in the eyes, “I deserve to be loved.”

Darius denied it himself that tears burned his eyes at those words, but Hunter could clearly see them brimming. Hunter exhaled, his shoulders relaxing. It was as if some sort of heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders at the realization that he deserved good things in life, that no matter what happened to him in his past, he deserved to be happy. He was treated poorly, thrown to the side a lot of the time and ignored, left for dead and sometimes worse, and yet here he stood. There were some pieces missing, but the puzzle looked just fine without them.

Darius smiled and chuckled, fighting at the tears in his eyes, “I’m proud of you, Hunter.”

Hunter smiled too and let the rest of that weight roll off his back, casting it away. He wouldn’t let it control him anymore, “I’m proud of me, too.”

Darius went to give him a hug, but to his surprise, Hunter beat him to it. He quickly stepped into his space and wrapped his arms around him, Darius still kneeling so for once Hunter seemed taller. Darius faltered for a moment, still a bit stunned that Hunter had initiated the contact, but he cast that feeling away in just a moment and returned the boy’s embrace. He held him close, probably wrinkling up the shirt he just fixed for him, but for once he didn’t care about something like that. He was happy Hunter was healing. He may not be one-hundred percent happy, but he was doing his best, and that’s all any of them could ask of him.

Darius rubbed a hand up and down his back for a second before he placed his hands on Hunter’s arms and pulled himself away, looking up at his face and smiling, “I can’t believe how much you’ve grown.”

Hunter tried to joke, “Don’t get too sentimental, I’ve still got a little growing to do.”

Darius chuckled again and lifted a hand to place on Hunter’s face, happy when Hunter didn’t flinch; he didn’t even attempt to move away, “That you do. I think tonight is giving you a chance to flourish a little more.”

“If I don’t completely embarrass myself,” He was nervous, but he said that with a lighthearted tone.

“You won’t,” Darius said, letting him go finally and standing at his full height, “You can do no

wrong in that girl's eyes… Now get your shoes on, Luz is probably waiting for you downstairs."

Hunter did just that, grabbing his shoes and slipping them on as Darius went for the door. When Hunter was done, he stood again and looked at Darius' back, calling out to him, "Hey Darius?"

The former coven head turned around to look at him, a curious expression on his face, "Yes, little one?"

The nickname made Hunter smile again, and he exhaled, relaxed, "Thank you. For everything."

That made him feel… *good.* He hadn't felt his best in a long time either, but that made him feel like he had done something right for once. He didn't want to get choked up though, not in front of his kid, "Thank *you."*

Hunter's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, but his smile never fell, "For what?"

Darius spoke his next words with ease, "For being here."

And then he turned away and left the room, heading downstairs to join the rest of the family. *His* family. That had a nice ring to it. Hunter felt warm at the man's words, and he looked at the empty doorway he'd just been standing in for a moment longer. He couldn't wipe the smile from his face, not now and not when he looked in the stand-up mirror against the wall. For once, he didn't think he looked all that bad. A smile suits him. So does feeling loved.

He blew out a deep breath, some of the nervous energy he felt about the dance falling away, "Make your family proud, Clawthorne-Deamonne-Whispers."

He chuckled, "Kind of long, but I like it."

He turned away from the mirror and left the room, going to join his family downstairs.

- - -

"Hunter, you look fine," Luz told him as they landed in front of Hexide just like they did every day for school.

The sun had gone down and the front of the building was crowded with students heading inside for Grom, and Hunter was out here with Luz fixing his hair and making sure his shirt was still tucked in after flying maybe a little too fast, "Are you sure? Everyone at home said I look great, but I have my doubts."

"You're just nervous because you're going out with Willow for the first time," Luz told him, but she wore an amused smile.

What she just said put a smile on his face, and he giggled like a little kid, "I am, aren't I?"

Luz giggled too, "See? You're just as adorkable as always."

"Well, hello there miss, aren't you looking incredibly dashing tonight," Said the voice on one Amity Blight, both of them just now noticing her standing in front of them a few feet, a hand on her hip.

Luz looked at her and her face heated up at the sight of her in her pretty purple and black dress, "May I say the same for you? Because wow."

Amity giggled and stepped closer to them, hugging her girlfriend and getting a kiss on the cheek

from her before she set her eyes on Hunter. She was surprised to see him so dressed up. Obviously, he would be on a night like tonight, he had to dress up for an occasion like this, but she'd never seen him like this before; she smiled with pride, "Well, look at you! Very handsome, I must say, Mr. Clawthorne."

Hunter lifted a finger and corrected her teasingly, "Uh, that's Mr. Clawthorne-Deamonne-Whispers to you, Ms. Blight."

Amity smiled bigger and glanced at Luz briefly, "My apologies. Your name is very lovely."

She dropped her teasing attitude at that, and so did Hunter, smiling softer, "Thanks."

"There you guys are!" And there was Gus, dragging Matt behind him by the hand. He skid to a stop next to Amity and he beamed with joy, "Whoa Hunter! You look great!"

"Thanks!" His friends were making him feel better about this, easing his stress a little; he supposed first dates were supposed to bring this sort of anxiety, "All of you look amazing, too."

Luz tossed her hair over her shoulder and swiped a hand downwards, dismissing him in a joking manner, "Oh, stop it, you."

Amity looked around curiously, her eyes finally landing on Gus, "Where's Willow? She said she'd meet us here."

"Oh, she's here. She just had to stop and pick something up real quick," Gus smiled, looking at Hunter and winking; that confused the blonde, but he didn't have time to mention it, because Willow was now walking over, as if on cue.

And wow, he'd never seen someone so pretty.

She was wearing a pastel green dress, the skirt of it puffy and sparkly. She wore brown slip-on shoes that looked rather comfortable, white ankle socks with a little green bow on the ankle that matched her dress. Her hair was pulled back in a braid, white flowers adorning it. She looked stunning, and Hunter's face felt warm the moment he laid eyes on her.

"Hi guys!" She greeted as she joined her friends, and when her eyes met Hunter's, her smile softened as did her tone, "Hey Hunter."

He swallowed the nervous lump in his throat and his voice was obviously higher pitched than normal when he spoke, "H-Hi, Willow."

She looked nervous too, but she was better at hiding it than he was, and her smile widened when she looked over his outfit, "Wow, you look beautiful."

Hunter was quite proud of himself for holding in the squeak that tried to claw its way up his throat at her words, but he couldn't hide how red his face was. He was genuinely touched at the compliment though, "Th-Thank you, um. No one's ever said that to me before."

She tilted her head, and she was looking at him so softly, "Well, get used to it."

He swallowed his anxiety down again, and he returned the compliment genuinely, "You probably hear it all the time, but I think you look beautiful, too."

His compliment honestly made her feel like crying because, no, she actually didn't hear that all of the time, but something about him thinking that she did was heartwarming. He really thinks that

she's that beautiful. She giggled a little, it was a soft sound, and she looked down at her hands and the small object that she gently grasped between them. She suddenly remembered why she was the last one here.

"Oh! I got you something," She said, lifting her head to catch his eyes again.

Hunter looked surprised by that, and he lifted a hand and gently jabbed a finger against his chest, "You got *me* something?"

She nodded and took the few steps forward it took to stand in front of him, "Yeah, I um, I got you this."

She held it up to show him; it was a little flower. It was a shade of pink, darker in hue, "It's pretty, but I-I didn't get you anything."

"That's okay, you already got me a flower. It was my turn to return the favor," She said it with a smile, and then she was raising the flower and suddenly one of her hands was on his face and the other was tucking the flower behind his ear. His face felt warm, and she stepped away too soon, but her next words took his breath away, "It's the same shade as your eyes. I've always loved the color."

He could've cried then. His eye color was a known trait of Grimwalkers, so her telling him that… It was like she was telling him that it was okay to be different. It's like she was telling him that he would be okay.

She clasped her hands at her waist and smiled even bigger, this time it reached her eyes, "There! Now you look perfect!"

She was so nice to him, she always had been. He used to hate how it made him feel, he felt so vulnerable like this, but he'd learned that being vulnerable sometimes wasn't all that bad. He was allowed to let people in. It was nice to have them here.

The giggle that escaped him he could've gone without though, and he slapped a hand over his mouth in embarrassment, his face burning horribly. Willow thought it was endearing though, and she giggled along with him. Luz cleared her throat then, interrupting their moment and, oh my Titan, they both forgot they were all here.

Now Willow was blushing too, both she and Hunter looking at their friends now and Luz had to hold in a laugh at the looks on their faces, "That was really adorable."

"Yeah, so adorable I kind of want to puke," Matt fake gagged, and Gus elbowed him to shut him up.

"Why don't we head inside?" Amity suggested, offering her arm to Luz, "Batata."

"Oh, Ms. Blight, such a gentleman," Luz looped her arm through her girlfriend's, turning away from their friends and starting to head towards the entrance of the school; Luz looked over her shoulder at the rest of them and gestured for them to follow, "You coming?"

Gus beamed and grabbed Matt's hand, "Of course, we are! Come on, Matty! Let's get our groove on!"

Matt assumed he had heard that in the human realm at some point, and despite acting like he found it annoying, the smile he held showed that he found it charming, and he followed Gus with ease. Willow laughed lightly at her friends as they rushed off, and then she turned back to look at

Hunter, her date. He looked so nervous, and he felt it too. It was just the two of them though, they were the same as always.

So, she held out her hand to him and smiled happily, “You coming or what?”

He broke out of his embarrassed reverie, looking at her hand now outstretched between them and then at her. He was nervous and scared, but it wasn’t such an overwhelming feeling anymore, this was a good feeling for once. This was something he didn’t mind feeling nervous and scared about. It was new territory, but she wasn’t going to hurt him, and he knew that. He trusted her. He trusted all of them.

So, he smiled and took her hand, “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

And when she led him inside, he found it easy to follow her. The tension melted away, the fear and anxiety becoming less with every step. For once, venturing into the unknown didn’t feel like being crushed by a heavy weight. He had support now, he had people who loved him and would be there for him. He didn’t have to be scared anymore, because now he wasn’t alone.

And now he wasn’t scared to admit that it was okay for him to be happy.

And he was. Truly, genuinely, happy.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so so *so* much for reading. all of your reviews and kudos and bookmarks and even the silent support means so much to me as a writer. i hope this story resonated with some people. thanks a million for supporting me, and plz always remember that you are loved <3

End Notes

Thank you for reading!! Leave a review and let me know what you think!! I'll post the next chapter on Thursday!! Until then, have a nice day/night!! <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!